THE WINDING LANE

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THE WINDING LANE

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"The Hidden City," etc.

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1

THERE was a certain amount of local comment when Francis Brandon, the novelist, first came to live with his mother in an old cottage called Willowbrook, half a mile or less from Harley Green, where Surrey joins Sussex. There was probably only one person in the neighbourhood who had read one of his novels, and that was a young person named Audrey Avenel, who was an indefatigable reader of almost everything provided by a circulating library in Guildford—to the distress of her mother, who sometimes glanced at these books with disapproval amounting in some cases to terror. Certainly no one within a ten-mile radius of that old-fashioned village of Harley Green had bought a novel by Francis Brandon, preferring mostly the cheap editions of Edgar Wallace if they had a taste for fiction. It is doubtful whether anyone in the wide world had actually paid down seven-and-sixpence for a novel by this author, though once he had seen an elderly lady reading one of his books in a third-class carriage of an electric train from Waterloo—it bore the label of Mudie's Library—and was so abashed, being a shy man, that he blushed for a moment behind his evening paper. She closed it abruptly and grimly after reaching Claygate and devoted herself to a cross-word puzzle. Yet he was not without reputation at that time among people who would have been called "highbrow"—detestable phrase!—in Harley Green.

There is a shop in Beauchamp Place, off the Brompton Road—you go up three steps to the front door—which refuses to pander to the popular taste and where a new novel by Francis Brandon was placed next to one by Virginia Woolf and not far from the complete edition of *The Forsyte Saga*, until it became soiled by the sun streaming through the bow-fronted window, and was marked down to three shillings and sixpence. Lydia Beaumont, the critic, with a pen like a sword to pierce the armour of conceit in any author whose books sold more than a thousand copies—she slew "best sellers" as a lady in Surrey will pluck weeds from a herbaceous border and cast them to the rubbish heap—praised the work of Francis Brandon in words which might have been like strong wine to a weak head, but which Brandon read with an odd look of surprise and a faint smile of derision.

"*Here is a rare genius*," she wrote. "*At a time when the presses are printing mass-produced muck which goes under the name of fiction, it is*

startling and refreshing to come across a novel in which every word is a jewel and every thought a flower."

"Gosh!" said the author of that book under review. He scrumpled up the press cutting and lit his pipe with it at the breakfast table, knowing that his last novel, equally praised by Lydia Beaumont and critics of her clique—he dined with them sometimes in Chelsea and Soho—had only been subscribed to the extent of six hundred copies by the booksellers and libraries. But for a weekly article in a northern syndicate of newspapers and occasional short stories, he would not have been so prosperous as he felt at present. He was glad his mother had not read that cutting. She would have believed every word of it, having an incurable faith in his literary genius, and a sense of anger with the world because it was not more richly rewarded.

Without having read his novels, Harley Green and its neighbourhood—south of Guildford where Surrey heaths meet at Sussex woods—became aware that a literary man, as they called him, or a writing fellow, as others said, had arrived among them. At first they did not know what to make of this shabby young man in the thirties who strolled down to the village stores on the morning following his arrival in an old Burberry and gray flannel trousers and bought four penny exercise books, a pair of bootlaces, a packet of pipe cleaners, and three mouse traps.

The village postmistress—whose office was in an old cottage at the corner of the green, with a gable that had fallen askew owing to the age of its timbers—suspected this new occupant of Willowbrook Cottage of being a dissolute young man. Strange and almost improper telegrams arrived for him now and then. There was one from a woman who signed herself Lydia, which the postmistress had to write out and send up by her son Johnny on his bicycle.

It read: "*We sigh for you in Soho we mourn for you in Maida Vale why do you try to escape my fatal beauty.*" Johnny brought back the answer written on the form in a very neat and minute hand, every letter perfectly formed though it almost needed a magnifying glass, and she made it out to be: "*Thanks I am trying to save my soul in Surrey Francis Brandon.*" A week later a telegram arrived from Chelsea signed Val Foster. It was a wonder the London post office had accepted it. It said: "*Why the blazes weren't you at the palette club last night we had a great binge and missed your chaste and noble spirit Lydia dissolved in tears.*" To which the gentleman at Willowbrook answered as follows: "*Rats to you and love to Lydia I am wedded to the simple life Brandon.*"

Mrs. Narracott, the sister of the gardener at Harley Hall—belonging to the Avenel family, who had been there for hundreds of years—had been engaged as general servant to Mrs. Brandon—or housekeeper, as she preferred to call herself—and brought news to her friends in the village about the manners and customs of the new arrivals.

"Shabby genteel," she reported—having been maid to Lady Lamberton before she became the wife and widow of a policeman. "More shabby than genteel—if you ask me," she added. "They lives on nothing at all. Toasted cheese for supper with a bit of rice pudding, 'ardly a sniff of meat, week in week out, and a regular picnic life. The young man comes in irregular to meals and works a typewriter in the garden, or lies on his back in the sun if he's not prowling about the woods and commons. 'Thinking things out,' he tells his Ma, and is very dreamy and absent-minded like, and that shy he blushes when I takes up his morning cup of tea. His Ma waits on him hand and foot and treats him like a big baby, lowering her voice when he sits thumping his typewriter in the room upstairs on rainy days. 'My son's writing,' she says, when I do a bit of sweeping. 'Kindly refrain from making a noise with the broom.' In the evenings they turn on the wireless and plays a game called chess together. No airs about them, as you might say, and I've no complaints, Mrs. Mew, but there's no pickings to be had in that house. Poverty-stricken."

2

THE AVENELS were the first to call on Mrs. Brandon and her son. That was due to Audrey Avenel, who suggested the idea at breakfast one morning when silence had descended upon the family after a brief but heated argument between Dick, who was home for the Easter holidays from Winchester, and Sylvia, who had returned to Harley Hall—a little old manor house which bore the date 1540 over its main gable—after a brief episode in a milliner's shop near Knightsbridge. The argument was on quite a trivial subject, as usual. Sylvia was annoyed with her brother for driving her baby Austin without permission and making it filthy on wet roads when she had just cleaned it. Dick maintained that this ridiculous little mouse trap—one couldn't call it a car—belonged to the family and not to any individual member thereof.

There were other charges and counter charges, until Mrs. Avenel protested from behind the coffee pot.

"You're making my head ache by all this breakfast-table snarling. Sylvia, my dear, why do you and Dick always goad each other? It's so unnecessary."

Colonel Avenel was reading the *Morning Post*. He didn't seem to like what he read.

"Poor old England!" he said, with a heavy sigh, as though another blow had stricken a country which he had had the honour to serve in peace and war.

Audrey had finished her breakfast. She was still in pajamas, covered by a silk dressing gown. Her short crop of straw-coloured hair glinted in the sunlight which streamed through the casement windows of this morning room. She sat staring out of those windows with a slightly restless look, as though wondering what she could make of the day ahead.

"There's a new man in the neighbourhood," she remarked. "Why not call on him?"

Her sister Sylvia, younger looking by a year or so, and darker in the colour of her eyes and hair, glanced across the table at her and smiled.

"Poor old Audrey!" she said, in much the same tone as her father had said, "Poor old England!"

"Exactly," said Audrey. "The same to you, little one."

Mrs. Avenel was interested in Audrey's remark.

"You mean the new people at Willowbrook? Mrs. Moreland was telling me something about them. She knows everything, as all clergymen's wives do. A mother and son, she says. I suppose we ought to call."

"I saw the man," said Audrey, "yesterday, as a matter of fact. He's not much to look at, really, but attractive in a way. I should say he sleeps in his clothes, but he has a serious face and shy eyes."

That remark seemed to amuse her sister Sylvia.

"How do you know about his eyes, Audrey? So soon, I mean."

Audrey obliged her by a little explanation.

"I happened to look into them. He was standing in his garden where the flowers have grown like weeds since the cottage has been empty. He was staring across the fields between a gap in the trees, and there was a kind of ecstasy on his face, as though he weren't used to such a view—which bores you and me to death, Sylvia, as well we know."

"Good heavens, yes!" said Sylvia. "I prefer the view of Knightsbridge as seen from the inside of a shop window, except for the old cat inside. Go on,

Audrey. This is getting thrilling. Your eyes met, as in a novel by Michael Arlen."

Audrey's eyes, which were of a lightish brown, like her father's, laughed behind their lashes.

"They did. I coughed discreetly, and the man looked at me with some surprise and, I must admit, with considerable apprehension."

Dick Avenel, of Winchester, smiled with the superiority of an only brother.

"He must have heard about you," he remarked.

Audrey continued her narrative, pleased by this family interest.

"He retreated hurriedly behind some tall foxgloves and pretended to be looking for snails or something until I had passed."

"That man knows a dangerous woman when he sees one," observed Sylvia thoughtfully. "Now, my demure beauty might not alarm him."

"Demure is good," said Dick, helping himself to some marmalade. "You two sluts are a danger to the neighbourhood."

Sylvia gave him a hard punch, and there was a breakfast-table battle.

It was Audrey and her mother who called on the Brandons. Mrs. Brandon happened to be at home and gave them tea, which was brought in by Mrs. Narracott, who had once been Audrey's nurse and to whom she winked heavily, as much as to say, "Shabby genteel, my dear. Not like Harley Hall."

The drawing room, which had once been called a parlour, in a cottage with old beams and low ceilings, was furnished in the Tudor style, cheaply and plainly, with rush-covered chairs and oak tables. There were some etchings on the walls and two or three oil paintings of London scenes—one of a coffee stall and its crowd—signed "Val Foster," as Audrey could see by glancing over her shoulder.

Mrs. Brandon was a thin little lady with short hair and very bright, shrewd, humorous eyes, perfectly at her ease but a little on guard. Audrey Avenel thought that she looked delicate and worn, as though she had had a hard life. She also thought that this lady did not approve of her after one quick, penetrating look.

"Perhaps I'm too pretty," thought Audrey Avenel. "Perhaps this is one of those mothers who guard their sons like dragons from any designing female. Where's the son?"

The son did not appear for some time. In fact, Mrs. Brandon announced rather quickly that her son was writing in the garden, and that she never interrupted him at such times.

"So interesting to have a literary man in the neighbourhood," said Mrs. Avenel. "I'm afraid we're not very bookish people down here, except my daughter Audrey, who reads everything. I hope your son doesn't write those alarming novels which are being produced just now?"

"They're not at all alarming," said Mrs. Brandon, as though quickly on the defensive. "My son is an idealist."

"Delightful!" said Mrs. Avenel. "The modern young man is so—well—difficult nowadays. The war, of course. It altered everything."

She gave a slight sigh, remembering her brother and many friends of the family who had not come back from that episode of ancient history.

"Some things for the better, perhaps," said Mrs. Brandon cheerfully. "The London slums are not so squalid as they were when I knew them first. People have more respect for themselves. There is not the same grinding poverty."

"My husband disapproves of the dole," said Mrs. Avenel mildly.

Mrs. Brandon seemed to think that likely. Most people did, she thought, although one couldn't let people starve to death. She mentioned that her husband had been an East End doctor and that they had seen the seamy side of life for thirty years.

"You will find the country quiet after London," remarked Mrs. Avenel.

"That's why my son and I have come," answered Mrs. Brandon.

Audrey ventured her first remark—not that she was timid in making remarks as a rule.

"It seems a pity to escape from civilization. Your son may find it too quiet, perhaps, not to say boring."

Mrs. Brandon did not think so.

"Our conversation is mainly about herbaceous borders and the best soil for roses," said Audrey, keeping her end up. "We stagnate. Some of us may even be said to suffocate."

Mrs. Brandon smiled at her in a more friendly way, as though understanding.

"Not enough interests?" she asked.

"Very few," said Audrey, "and quite unintellectual."

Presently Francis Brandon appeared. He did not intend to appear, and when he came into the drawing room saying, “Tea ready, Mother?” he was startled and disconcerted by the sight of visitors and prepared for an immediate retreat.

“Good-afternoon!” said Audrey, to lure him in. She had read one of his books, *The Secret Life*, and had worried her way through it. It was a queer, difficult kind of book, without much of a plot, and rather dull, she had thought, but well written. It was about the secret thoughts of a man who lived a lonely life in London until he married his landlady’s daughter, who nagged at him. This man looked as though he might have married his landlady’s daughter, she thought. He had a worried look, as though he had been working too hard, and he was extraordinarily shabby. His hair was tousled, and he had one hand thrust into his side pocket as though he had a pipe there. She guessed about that pipe, which he revealed later. She saw his eyes again when she spoke to him like that.

They were gray and shy, as she had told Sylvia. As shy as a fawn’s, she thought. He had a delicate, haggard-looking face, and was probably on the wrong side of thirty—an age she liked, not finding much in common with boys of twenty or thereabouts whom she met at local garden parties.

“Oh, Frank,” said his mother rather nervously, “Mrs. Avenel and her daughter have called.”

She turned to Mrs. Avenel and said, “My son,” with a kind of pride, as though introducing a very important person.

He did not say, “How-do-you-do?” or make the usual remark about the weather, but shook hands civilly enough and sat down on a low chair, clasping his long, thin hands round his bony knees and showing a bit of naked leg between his gray flannel trousers, and a pair of old socks, which had been heavily darned, as Audrey’s quick eyes observed with amusement.

Mrs. Avenel asked him if he liked the neighbourhood, and after thinking the subject out for a moment, he said, “It’s marvellously unspoilt. I’ve never seen such good trees.”

“Do you like trees?” asked Audrey.

He glanced at her with a faint smile. She thought that he liked the look of her.

“Don’t you?” he inquired politely.

“No, I prefer people.”

He glanced at her again, and she knew that he was measuring her up, judging her, as a novelist might. She wondered how he placed her type.

Perhaps one day he would put her into a novel, and she hoped it wouldn't be as dull as *The Secret Life*.

"One gets tired of crowds," he said. "Aren't there enough people about here?"

Audrey Avenel gave a list of them, while her mother was chatting with Mrs. Brandon.

Retired colonels, an impoverished peer or two, ancient ladies, city men who buy up the old farmhouses and live the simple life at week-ends, brainless boys from Aldershot now and then, the local vicars, and the secretary of the golf club. Desolating.

Brandon stared intently at one of his bony knees. He seemed to be thinking out her list of people.

"I daresay some of them are interesting," he suggested. "One ought to find odd types here and there in some of these old houses round about."

"Most of them are highly conventional," said Audrey.

He smiled at her over the stem of a pipe which he wasn't smoking. She saw that he had a sense of humour lurking behind his shyness.

"London is not a world away," he reminded her. "There's an electric train from Guildford every twenty minutes if one craves for the roar of Piccadilly and the seething mobs in Oxford Street."

"Well, it's life," said Audrey.

It was too congested, he thought. London was nerve-racking. He was glad to escape from the squalor of mean streets.

"This is a backwater," said Audrey Avenel. "Still, I'm glad you like it."

Presently Mrs. Avenel took leave of Mrs. Brandon. She was ashamed to have stayed so long for a first call, she said. She hoped Mrs. Brandon and her son would come to tea one day at Harley Hall. Perhaps Mr. Brandon would join the local golf club? That would be nice for her girls.

"Frank doesn't play golf," said Mrs. Brandon. "He has his work to do, you know."

"Oh, well, a game of bridge now and then," suggested Mrs. Avenel.

"I'm afraid we're rather unsociable," said Mrs. Brandon. "My son and I play chess in the evenings."

"The girls dance sometimes to the wireless or the gramophone," said Mrs. Avenel. "A few young people, you know. If your son would join them . . . ?"

She was a good mother. She knew the boredom of her beautiful Audrey. She did her best for these restless daughters who complained bitterly of the dullness of life in their old home and planned dangerous ways of escape. Sylvia's hat shop, for instance, where she had earned twenty-five shillings a week until her health broke down.

Mrs. Brandon explained carefully that her son was not fond of dancing. He had his work to do. He preferred quietude and country walks, where he could think out his plots and ideas. She was quite sure Mrs. Avenel would understand.

"Oh, perfectly," said Mrs. Avenel, looking disappointed.

"Well, I hope you'll enjoy your hermit life," said Audrey, looking at this shabby young man who had been so carefully guarded from intrusion. No callers were to be encouraged, evidently.

"I don't shun humanity now and then," he told her, with a sudden flick of amusement in his eyes. "But I'm not much of a social bird."

"We won't worry you," said Audrey, with a touch of sarcasm which amused him again. She was very young. He put her down at less than twenty —and was wrong by a year.

"Thanks," he said.

When the visitors had gone, the mother and son looked at each other humorously.

"Well, I did my best for you, Frank," said Mrs. Brandon. "It was your fault that you got caught like that. I'm afraid we shall have other callers."

"That was a pretty girl," said Francis Brandon. "Rather amusing, too."

Mrs. Brandon looked at him suspiciously.

"A young hussy, I should say. Ready to flirt with anything in trousers."

Brandon looked down at his gray flannel bags in which he had been gardening.

"Not in these trousers," he said, with conviction.

3

THERE were other visitors who called on the Brandons and left cards, or invaded that long, low-ceilinged room where a novelist spent his evenings with the wireless which brought vibrations from the outside world to this

little house in a Surrey lane—the music of many nations, lectures in many tongues, the news of tragedy and crime and political turmoil, and sometimes a familiar voice, startling in its sudden intrusion, as when Lydia Beaumont, that intellectual lady, gave her weekly talk on books.

The visitors arrived mostly in motor cars, which gave warning of their approach, so that Francis Brandon, who shirked the social life, was able to slink discreetly into the copse at the end of his garden before they had reached the front door, through an awkward gate. Thus he missed numerous old ladies from neighbouring houses, who had heard of Mrs. Brandon through Mrs. Avenel, and felt it their duty to call, and other ladies, not so old, driving their own cars. Thus he missed Lady Lamberton, whose husband had commanded his division in time of war—"our old murderer," they had called him then—and a lady doctor who had a week-end cottage half a mile away from Willowbrook, where she obtained a weekly dose of ultraviolet rays and astonished field labourers and others by gardening in white shorts—as though she had forgotten to put on her petticoat—and a maiden lady with short hair and masculine appearance who bred Alsatians which were a terror to the tradesmen. But now and again he was caught by these friendly intruders. He failed to escape the vicar—a handsome, florid man with hearty manners—who invited him to become a scoutmaster and hoped that he would encourage local patriotism by becoming a vice president of the village cricket club and giving an occasional lecture of an anti-Bolshevik character in the village hall.

"I'm sure you will agree, Mr. Brandon," he said, "that we ought to do something to revive the spirit of the English village. People about here are too individualistic. They hide themselves away in walled gardens. They ignore the necessity of communal life—they are too self-centred and secretive. Now if, as a literary man, you could get up some amateur theatricals, or organize folk dances on the village green we might make a little name for ourselves as pioneers of social progress in rural England. I enlist your aid."

Francis Brandon tried to disguise his look of terror—the deadly shyness which overcame him—at the thought of leading a folk dance on the village green, or doing any of those things which the vicar suggested so genially.

"I'm afraid I'm hopeless at that kind of thing," he said feebly. "The fact is I came down here to get away from people. I'm rather a solitary kind of bird. I'm sure you will understand."

The vicar was disappointed but proceeded to urge his case with genial insistence, until he saw that Brandon was not to be recruited as an active

worker.

"I have to plough a lone furrow," he said with a sigh. "At least, my dear sir, I hope you will help me in my little endeavours by sending an autographed copy of one of your books—I humbly confess that I have not read them yet—for my forthcoming bazaar, which Lady Lamberton has so kindly promised to open. *Noblesse oblige*, and, if I may say so, *bis dat, qui cito dat*."

"Certainly," said Brandon, mightily relieved by this way of escape. "But I'm afraid my books are not very readable. They are hardly of a popular kind, judging from the sales."

The vicar waved his hand.

"I want to encourage the habit of reading. Personally, I find dear old Edgar Wallace my greatest source of relaxation—a wonderful man!—but I respect the higher intellectual flights for which, personally, I have no time, in a scattered parish. My young friend Miss Audrey Avenel tells me that your last novel was excellent—and entirely on the side of the angels. Splendid! And rather rare nowadays, I'm afraid. Not that I'm narrow-minded! On the contrary, I believe in the frank discussion of vital facts. But some of you young writers nowadays go a bit too far. You must admit that. A bit too far, eh, Mrs. Brandon?"

Mrs. Brandon agreed rather grudgingly. She had suffered momentary terror lest her son should let himself in for any of these social works, which she knew he would hate like poison and from which she would have to extricate him.

"I hope I shall see you in my little church," said the vicar. "I try to make my sermons simple and straightforward and in accordance with modern science, without being revolutionary or, on the other hand, reactionary. I keep an open mind, and, if I may say so, an open heart. In this time of doubt and difficulty, this age of reason, this revolt of youth, one has to avoid too much rigid dogma, and teach Christian ethics without heresy hunting or narrow interpretation. I should be glad of your criticism, my dear sir."

Brandon hesitated. It was Mrs. Brandon who answered for him.

"I'm afraid you won't see my son in church much, Mr. Moreland. He prefers a walk in the woods."

She smiled across at her son, seeing his embarrassment. It was a secret grief with her that he shirked religious services, she herself being a good Church of England woman, but she shielded him from this rather aggressive

clergyman, and knew his shyness and his hatred of hurting people's feelings by apparent incivility.

"Well, well," said the vicar. "There's much to be said for meditation under a blue sky—or even a gray one! I don't coerce anyone. I know the difficulties of faith nowadays. Those scientists—this free-thinking world! It's all very difficult!"

He put a hand on Brandon's shoulder.

"Always welcome," he said. "The open door. No compulsion. But people like my sermons—I avoid controversy—and we have a nice little choir. The postmistress has a charming contralto, and Miss Sylvia Avenel plays the organ—delightfully. Look in. You can always go out again if you don't like our style."

He spoke with an expansive geniality, with good-natured tolerance, with an air of being thoroughly broad-minded.

When he had gone, Brandon wiped a little sweat off his forehead, as though he had gone through a severe ordeal.

"That was frightful!" he groaned. "Why can't these people leave us alone? Why do they break in like this when we want to be quiet and live our own lives?"

Mrs. Brandon laughed.

"My dear Frank, London is the only place in which one can live like a hermit. It's one of the penalties of living in the country—people will be sociable and neighbourly."

"They won't catch me," said Brandon. "I shall go into hiding."

4

One of Brandon's neighbours gave him a lift one day as he was slogging home from Guildford after a day in London. It was raining, and he had not taken his waterproof coat, so that he was wet by the time he had walked a few miles. Not that he minded. A little rain wouldn't hurt his clothes, and he would change when he reached home. He was not enormously grateful when a good-looking car slowed down just ahead of him and its driver called out in a friendly way:

"Would you like a lift?"

Brandon looked at the driver and knew him by sight. It was the owner of a noble old farmhouse at the end of his lane—Yeoman's Farm—which had been modernized, fitted with electric light, and adapted to the use of a city gentleman who liked to live the simple life at week-ends, with a staff of servants to entertain the numerous guests who came down to see his rose gardens, his velvet lawns, his ancient barns, his woods and meadows, and that Elizabethan homestead which now had four bathrooms and a telephone in every bedroom. Mrs. Narracott, who was a fund of information about the neighbours and liked to gossip about them at meal-time, especially when Brandon's mother went up to town now and then, had spoken about the gentleman at Yeoman's Farm with respect for his wealth and disapproval of his morals.

"As rich as Creases," she said. "I daresay you've heard of him, sir. Mr. Cyril Chantry. He gets his portrait into the Sunday papers, at race meetings and such like. A director of companies, they tell me, though I don't understand these things. His wife killed herself, poor lady. Walked into the mill pond and drowned herself. After that he was mixed up with a divorce case with Lady Hermione Chubb over at Aldershot. I wouldn't be a servant over at Yeoman's Farm, not for all the pickings they get. It's not safe for any female, if you ask me."

Some of this character study came back to Brandon's mind when the man slowed down with his expensive-looking car and offered him a lift.

"Thanks very much," he answered, "but I would just as soon walk."

Cyril Chantry smiled. He was a heavily built man with hunched shoulders as he sat at his wheel, and a pale, rather flabby face with dark eyes heavily puffed under their lids.

"Better get in," he said. "It's quite wet."

He opened the door, and Brandon could not refuse the invitation without incivility.

"Willowbrook Cottage, isn't it?" asked Cyril Chantry. "I've seen you about the lanes. The Avenels mentioned you. You write things, don't you?"

Brandon admitted the distressing fact.

"Glad to know you," said his neighbour. "My name's Chantry. You may know my little place, called Yeoman's Farm. Pleasant, isn't it? If I weren't so tied to the City I would like to see more of it. I can only get down at week-ends. Drop in sometimes. There's always a cocktail going at twelve o'clock on a Sunday morning, and some interesting people to talk to, if you

like that sort of thing. Journalists—they won't leave me alone!—pretty ladies, racing men, all sorts of types. They like the drive down from town."

Brandon made a mental resolution that he would avoid Yeoman's Farm like a plague spot between Saturdays and Mondays. He had an idea, quite unjustified by experience, that Cyril Chantry's friends must be a poisonous crowd. But the man himself was civil and good-natured.

"I don't get much time for reading," he remarked with a kind of apology for not knowing Brandon's work. "A good detective story now and then is about my mark after a hard day's work in the city. It takes one's mind off financial affairs. Otherwise they keep one awake, business being what it is nowadays."

"Not good?" asked Brandon, who was utterly ignorant of financial affairs, but felt that he would have to pay for this lift by a few words which might appear reasonably intelligent.

"Dead rotten!" said Mr. Cyril Chantry. "There's no confidence in the country. No one is willing to take a chance. Everybody is investing in foreign securities. Capital is leaving the sinking ship."

"Meaning England?" asked Brandon.

Cyril Chantry shrugged his shoulders over his steering wheel.

"Barring the United States, the whole of Europe is in a bad way. And I'm not too sure of the U. S. A. All this prosperity talk. . . ."

He glanced sideways at Brandon and seemed to get cautious, as though he might have been talking too freely to a writing man.

"Nice country about here," he remarked. "It's bound to be spoilt one day. Too near London, of course. That's why I'm buying up a bit of land round Yeoman's Farm. It's safe to increase in value for building plots. When they bring the by-pass road along and get company's water up these lanes, there's sure to be considerable development. Two hundred pounds an acre, in my opinion, for agricultural land now fetching thirty. That's a tip for you, if you've any loose capital!"

"I haven't," said Brandon rather sharply. He hated this talk of a by-pass road and company's water and building sites. It was a dark threat to his little paradise. He detested this man who was giving him a lift home. He was one of those people who would destroy the beauty of England as a financial speculation—and sell its soul for a margin of profit. Damn the fellow! He was sorry that he had accepted this seat in his car.

"Well," said Cyril Chantry, "I daresay you're happy without it. I envy you literary and artistic men. You get other values out of life. Money means

nothing to you. Sometimes I would like to get rid of my own financial worries and start a new life in a new way. A ranch in Canada. Not bad, eh? A clean, healthy life and no responsibilities of international finance. I daresay you think that's hypocritical. Well, perhaps it is. I haven't the pluck to sell all my possessions like the young man in the Bible. But sometimes I wonder if there's anything in this financial game beyond a thrill now and then and the terrific adventure of it. One of my grooms has a better life than I have, really. Well, here we are. Glad to have met you."

He stopped his car outside Willowbrook Cottage and smiled in a friendly way at Brandon.

"Don't forget the cocktail hour! Twelve o'clock on Sundays. Always glad to see you."

"Thanks," said Brandon, rather stiffly.

He watched the car slink round the bend in the lane and was extremely annoyed that he had made the acquaintance of this neighbour.

5

Now that people are interested in the life of Francis Brandon—a shameless lady named Lydia Beaumont earned five hundred dollars in an American magazine by an intimate and inaccurate analysis of his soul—something of his character and career should be described before he left London for that cottage in the country. My authority for this information is Val Foster, who was his best friend since a day in the year of grace 1916 when they shared the same dugout along the Albert-Bapaume Road below some dead trees called Loupart Wood, when there happened to be a war in France and Flanders, to say nothing of other battle fronts where men of many nations had dug themselves ditches as a slight protection from high-explosive fire. Val Foster, who was then a soldier, like most men of his age and class, was also an artist, as he still remains—to the distress of some of his critics—and it was the artist's eye which made him interested in Brandon.

"There was something about his face," said Val Foster, "which made my fingers itch to draw him. As a matter of fact, I made a sketch of him on the back of an envelope as he sat in that lousy dugout, with his tin hat at the back of his head and his chin sunk on his gas bag, and the chalky mud of the Somme plastered up to his eyebrows. It was the face of a tortured boy. He hated the war with a deadly loathing, and his nerves had gone all wrong. It

was lucky for him that he was wounded a week later. I believe he would have cracked. . . . A sensitive plant, not meant for the rough-and-tumble of a naughty world. He came out again in '17 and was taken prisoner. I joined him in a prison camp—not too bad, really—and found him editing a magazine produced on a typewriter. Some of his stuff was extraordinarily good, though a bit lofty for officer laddies. We shared the same hut with four other men and quarrelled like hell and liked each other. I suppose my brutal ways—you know my genial style—broke down his reserve. With the other prisoners he always behaved like a new boy in a boarding school. Unbelievably shy!"

Val Foster met him after the war—clapped him on the shoulder in the Strand, where he was looking into a picture shop.

"Hullo, old bird!" said Foster.

"Oh, how-do-you-do?" said Brandon, colouring up to his forehead where the hair was creeping back.

"How-do-you-do be damned," said Foster. "Come and have a drink and tell me what you're doing in this distressing world of peace, which makes one regret the happy days of war."

Brandon said he preferred peace. But he thought they had made a terrible mess of it and that the men weren't getting a fair deal. He felt guilty, he said, in having such a soft time, and was afraid to walk about London because of all these ex-Service men out of work and cadging sixpences from old pals.

"It's only the cadgers who cadge," remarked Val Foster with his cheerful cynicism, and he was amused by Brandon's description of himself as having a soft time. His clothes—and it was the first time Foster had seen him in "civvies"—looked as if he had bought them off the peg at Isaac Brothers, and when he went into a pub off Fleet Street he was abashed because he could not afford to return Val Foster's drink, having nothing but fourpence halfpenny in his trousers pocket. He had probably parted with his loose change to some blind man on the curbstone, or to some ex-soldier mumbling a hard luck tale to a man with pity in his eyes.

Foster kept in with him during the years after the war. For three or four years he was a sub-editor on a daily paper, but found the strain too hard and gave up his job for free-lance work. Lately he had been living with his mother in a small flat in a large set of mansions on the Pimlico side of Sloane Square, originally built as workmen's dwellings but now inhabited by out-of-work actresses (he gave them a miss on the stone stairs, said Foster), elderly ladies who had seen better days—one of them was the second cousin of a baronet's aunt—and an odd journalist or two who worked

mostly at night. Foster went to see him there and met his mother, whose husband had died in harness recently as a doctor somewhere in the neighbourhood of the Commercial Road. Brandon had a room about the size of a suburban bathroom—"better than a dugout!" he said to Val Foster—in which he wrote his first novel and two plays which no manager had had the patience to read (theatrical managers, with few exceptions, are unable to read), and articles which found their way into literary publications of high repute and small circulation, like the *London Messenger* and the *English Survey*, for which he also reviewed poetry. He earned his living mainly by a weekly article to a newspaper syndicate and felt ashamed because he could earn money so easily—six pounds a week on an average—when brother officers were still out of jobs or putting their heads into gas ovens because of despair in their hearts and something that had snapped in them.

"Too sensitive altogether," said Val Foster. "He was always worrying about the Peace Treaty and the League of Nations and Unemployment, and was one of those fellows who pitied the Germans because we rubbed their noses in the dirt after they had made a mess in the world. Not my style, you know!"

He lived a solitary sort of life—his novel, *The Secret Life*, was to some extent autobiographical, apart from the landlady's daughter—and went slogging for tremendous walks through London, watching people with his shy eyes, trying to read the riddle of their lives, pitying most of them, when they were probably very cheerful with themselves, and thinking out his own ideas.

"He was too lonely," said Foster, "and in my opinion overcherished by his mother, who thought the world of him. I tried to drag him out now and then. I even persuaded him to join the Pen and Palette Club, which is pretty rowdy sometimes. He stood about at first, looking like a fish out of water, with a nervous smile as much as to say, "I ought to enjoy this sort of thing—it's all very jolly—but I prefer shell fire." After a bit he warmed up a little. One of the minor triumphs of my life—which has not been without its victories, God wot!—was when I made him just a little drunk on white wine, which was stronger than it looked. He became quite a humorous dog when his inhibitions were released by the beneficent effect of alcohol, and sang "Auprès de ma blonde" while the other lads and lasses banged their forks on the tables and cheered him at the finish. Presently he became sobered by his own audacity and bolted like a frightened rabbit.

"Then Lydia Beaumont was stricken with a passion for him. You know Lydia? She would undermine a cathedral with her unconventionality. She

would break down the moral resistance of a Mormon Elder. She would laugh in a churchyard at the burial of her grandmother. She frightened Brandon exceedingly. He went in terror of her. But she broadened him. She humanized the lad. She took some of the shyness out of his eyes. She taught him to dance the fox trot. I believe as a novelist and a playwright he owes a lot to Lydia. She could hardly forgive him when he fled into the secret labyrinths of Surrey, where no human foot has trod. Poor Lydia!"

Val Foster was with Brandon when he first saw Willowbrook and became obsessed with the idea of living in it with his mother. It was after a tramping holiday abroad with Val Foster in the south of France, when they had put up at cheap inns, drunk much red wine of the coarsest vintage, talked enormously of books and art and the state of England—which still worried Brandon, as though *he* could do anything about it!—and the unfortunate intrusion of sex upon the work of men ("a damned nuisance which I try to dodge and can't afford anyhow," said Brandon), and the effect of sunshine upon the character of a people, like these good folks in Provence who seemed to adapt themselves wonderfully to life.

"Why not walk now and then in England?" suggested Brandon, when they parted at Victoria Station with a grip of hands.

"One can't," said Foster. "Now that the proletariat—the down-trodden poor you love so much—won't move a step without their motor cars, walking in London is more dangerous than war. Safety first for a pavement artist!"

"In the country," said Brandon. "Surrey." He waved his hand vaguely to the south.

Val Foster jeered at him.

"My dear good idiot! Surrey is the most dangerous place of all, and more congested than Oxford Street. I'm told they have a thousand deaths a day on the Hog's Back. It's worse than the Ypres Salient. I'm adventurous, but not foolhardy."

But they took a day return to Guildford and had lunch at the Lion and walked out along Quarry Street and took a bus somewhere and then walked through picturesque postcard villages, and halted at last in a leafy lane where, on one side, there was a view over woodlands to a distant line of hills and on the other side a little old house with a board up:

TO BE LET OR SOLD

Val Foster had a look at the view. It was rather wonderful. Not a house in sight in that direction as far as the eye could see, with the evening sun lying on massed foliage and, beyond, the faint line of the Sussex downs.

"The bungalow bugs don't seem to have invaded this patch," remarked Foster. "Careless of them, don't you think? Not an empty cigarette packet in sight! No ginger-beer bottles of a happy proletariat! Real fields with real cows! The loneliness of death! Perhaps a plague has happened in these parts. Perhaps the rural district council has been stricken with typhus. No by-pass! No petrol pumps! No hoardings! I wish I were back where the dear old buses roll down the King's Road to happy Hammersmith."

Francis Brandon was looking at the cottage with the signboard "To Be Let or Sold."

"That's enchanting," he said. "Wouldn't it be amusing to live in such a place? One might get to know something about birds and trees. One might think things out a bit. I believe I could work out some ideas in a place like this."

"Now, look here, my child," said Val Foster, "don't you go raving over this rat-haunted cottage. I've known men lose their souls and take to drink in places like this. I know a decent fellow who married a rich wife and lived on the Hog's Back. Now he's a moral wreck. In a place like this you would get dull eyed and obsessed with unpleasant inhibitions. What you want is plenty of people like me—the intelligentsia, the bright souls of life—to drag you out of your morbid introspection and your inferiority complex. Come back to the Pimlico Road. Better than the scent of wet leaves is the pleasant reek of fish and chips. Let's get back to London, where Lydia is waiting for a drink."

It was some months later—in the month of March—that Francis Brandon moved into the cottage half a mile from Harley Green, where Surrey woodlands creep out to Sussex downs.

6

WILLOWBROOK was rather more than a cottage and rather less than a "hall," as most of the old farmhouses were called in this district. It had belonged in the old days, no doubt, to a tenant farmer of the Avenels', or farther back to some yeoman of England—a free man on a few acres of his own earth. Lately, before Brandon bought it with the help of his mother and his father's

life insurance, it had been inhabited by a lady who had died there at the age of ninety or thereabouts. It had one big room with a low ceiling across which there were heavy black beams, and with casement windows in which the glass had a greenish tinge. There was a narrow oak staircase leading to the bedrooms where the plastered walls had bulged and the floors sloped at a decided angle, suggesting that a careless fellow might fall out of bed unless he slept with his feet to the window. There were big linen cupboards, and storerooms which smelt of apples from bygone harvests, and odd little stairs from one room to another, and wide fireplaces in the kitchen and parlour, as though former inhabitants had wanted to roast an ox now and then, but which were built, no doubt, for wooden logs before the use of coal.

"Well, it's the simple life, certainly," said Mrs. Brandon, when she inspected the place for the first time. "I'm sure to break my neck down one of these ridiculous little stairs, or knock my brains out on one of those beams. But I must say it's all very amusing after a flat in Pimlico. . . . Do you think there are any ghosts, Frank?"

"Heaps of them," he answered light-heartedly. "But nice, quiet honest ghosts of the old farming class. Look where the old couples used to plant their feet in front of that fireplace on long winter evenings. They wore the stone down after three centuries or so. And look how their shoulders rubbed against that old beam in the ingle nook. Many a dose they had there after a hard day's work in the fields, haymaking and harvesting. It's a friendly atmosphere, don't you think? They make us welcome."

"Novelist!" said his mother, with a sarcasm that was softened by her smile. She would live anywhere to make her son happy. Perhaps he wouldn't be so nervy as he had been in London. . . .

As a man who had been born and bred in London—his schooling had been at Westminster, with the playground behind the Abbey—Brandon had the cockney's love for the countryside and a deep ignorance of all the things which country people learn with their mother's milk and often dislike. The beauty of it astonished and entranced him. That view from the leaded panes of Willowbrook—his study was under the gable and looked across the fields and woods—prevented him from working sometimes. He stood at the window when he ought to have been writing a new chapter of his novel, or an article for that Northern syndicate, watching the ever changing panorama as each day and even each hour brought new effects of light and colour. Away in the distance was the line of the Sussex Downs, with Chanctonbury Ring as a landmark, marvellously clear and strangely close when there was "good visibility," as they learnt to say in war-time, generally after rain, or in

the calm of the evening. In unsettled weather he watched the clouds pile up, and light and shadow sweeping across the fields between the woods, and touching the foliage in early summer so that sometimes it was vividly and astoundingly green and at others sobered down to an olive darkness, and a minute later, when the sun streamed through a gap in the clouds, looking as though every oak tree had leaves of gold.

The sky was a revelation to him. He had never watched it much over London chimney pots, though he had seen it over parapets and barbed wire at dawn and dusk in Flanders. Often, after supper, when his mother was mending his socks, or putting new cuffs to his shirts, or reading a new number of the *Gardening World*, he left her to stand in his unkempt garden —he was putting it into shape by degrees—to see how the sky was getting on. It was often getting on in a way which made him hold his breath—with great flame-coloured wings spreading across dark woods and hedges, or building up fantastic castles above lakes of emerald, or cloudless, with a pale greenish blue into which a rose-coloured glow was creeping. He reported these things to his mother.

"There's a marvellous sunset to-night. Can't you leave those socks and have a look at it?"

She thought not. His socks were getting in a disgraceful condition now that he did so much walking and gardening.

"There's a great show of stars to-night. Billions of them, like a sky full of diamonds. I've never seen the Milky Way with such a stream of stars. It makes one feel ridiculously insignificant. That irritating novel of mine—what does it matter? I wonder what it all means?"

He was strangely and absurdly moved when he heard the first call of the cuckoo in the spring that followed his coming to Harley Green. He stood listening to that jester of the woods—with one joke that becomes monotonous and wearying—with a smile about his lips and a sudden lighting up in his eyes. He had read old Chaucer. He thought of the springtime of the world before chimney pots and high explosives and life's sophistication. His mind went back, as it went back too often, to the men he had known in the war. Those country boys who had been blown to bits and heard the cuckoo calling in English woods. Some of them had come from Harley Green, half a mile away, and their names were on a white cross down there. . . .

He was ashamed of his ignorance of nature and its secret life. His mother noticed, as she noticed everything he did, that he was getting absorbed in books about birds and trees and flowers, which he read now in the evenings

instead of playing chess with her. She watched him, with his pipe between his lips, studying coloured plates with intense concentration.

"It's distressing to think," he told her once, "that until yesterday I didn't know the difference between a jay and a woodpecker!"

"How could you?" she asked in her matter-of-fact way. "They don't build their nests in the Commercial Road, nor even in the plane trees of Westminster."

"One misses a lot, living in London," said Brandon.

"It has its advantages," said Mrs. Brandon, who was not quite sure that this country life was going to be good for a son who was inclined to be moody and introspective. Secretly she missed the noise of the buses, and the shop windows, and the sales at Peter Jones's and other shops. Things cost more in the country, she found. Fruit was abominably dear. But Frank had escaped from that woman Lydia, which was a comfort, anyhow. She had been rather frightened for a time. A shameless woman, she thought.

Even Mrs. Brandon was hardly aware how much her son liked this country experience. It gave him a new awareness to life in ways which are denied to those who walk through streets. He loved the bluish flame of the logs as they burned in one of those big fireplaces, and the hiss of the damp wood which he liked to fetch from the yard where it had been dumped by a man in the village. The oil lamps they used cast queer, fantastic shadows on the whitewashed walls which one never sees by electric light on London wall papers. Scents of wet earth and wood smoke from some distant bonfire, and last year's leaves in the copse below their field, and cottage flowers growing wild below their windows, were wafted to his nostrils as he shaved in the morning. Better than the smell of petrol and the soot from London chimney pots!

Even the rain—and it rained deplorably in that first month of his escape from London—thrilled him strangely when he stood under the shelter of some old barn and heard it swishing through bare trees and rushing down ditches and beating in gusts against his shelter. He liked to walk in it with bare head, getting wet through, to his mother's alarm, and then changing into dry clothes after a rub-down. It was as though his natural senses, dulled in city streets, had been reawakened in this contact with nature. He had a new sense of touch, as when he felt the rough bark of old trees or the soft smoothness of young leaves. His sense of smell was alert to the sweet stench of wet leaves and the sharp acrid rankness of farmyards and pigsties—ancient, historic, and traditional smells reaching back to primitive memories. His sense of hearing made him attentive to the rich chuckle of a blackbird or

the elfin laugh of a woodpecker, or the endless song of a lark rising above a ploughed field, or the whisper of tall grasses, or the drip of rain down leaden gutters on old roofs. His sense of sight was observant of light silvering a tree trunk, gleaming in the dew caught by innumerable spiders' webs on gorse bushes, changing the colour of fields and foliage with every passing cloud or touch of sun. He had some other sense, giving him sometimes a kind of pantheistic ecstasy, or even some spiritual awareness of being a part of this life force which stirred when spring came in every blade of grass and bare twig—even in the wet wind which disordered his hair as he walked bareheaded over the heath. He was a cockney born and bred, except for that spell of war, when his nerves had been jangled. He was the product of an intellectual culture that comes from books and pictures and city environment, but he was lured by that touch of primitive life in search of which other people of his type build bungalows in Surrey and come in endless procession along the Portsmouth Road on Saturdays and Sundays, picnicking on the wayside, tearing down young branches, grabbing bluebells to carry home behind their motor cycles, killing each other by trying to get first to a beauty spot, by head-on collisions at crossroads, by sideslips and cutting in, destroying the quietude and the loveliness they come out to find.

7

Mrs. Brandon, a little, thin, active-minded woman who had led a hard life with her doctor husband—hard because of its drudgery and poverty in an East End practice—sometimes imagined that she knew every mood of her literary son, until he surprised her sometimes by something new in moods. There were, of course, things in his mind which were his own secrets, and she knew that in spite of their intimate comradeship—this closeness of mother and son—there were thoughts which she did not share and mysteries which she could not penetrate, however watchful. But she understood him as nobody else could, and was patient when other people—a wife, for instance—might have been impatient.

He hurt her sometimes, though he would have been amazed and stricken to know it. That was generally when he was thinking out a new plot for a novel or a short story, or when something he was writing was not going well, as often happened. People thought he wrote easily. Lydia Beaumont accused him privately of being too "fluent." How little they knew! He agonized sometimes like a woman in labour, and often when he was writing

in his room upstairs she could hear him groaning, or pacing up and down the bare boards like a caged animal, or even crying out with a sharp despair.

At such times he came down to meals—keeping his mother waiting—with a suicidal look—"hag-haunted," as he called it once. He would sit there utterly silent, not knowing what he was eating, not listening to any remark she made, not passing her the things she wanted, not caring, it seemed, whether she was alive or dead, because of some imaginary creature or some train of thought obsessing his mind. If she asked him a question about his underclothes or what he would like for the evening meal—very necessary questions, after all—he would answer absent-mindedly or even gruffly.

"Anything, Mother. . . . My underclothes? Almost in rags? Well, why not? Nobody sees them."

Then he would get conscience-stricken and kiss her hand.

"Sorry. I've been writing muck. I can't get it straight. I wish to God I had stuck to a sub-editor's desk instead of trying to write books which nobody wants to read."

Sometimes, when she tapped at his door to say the post would be going in half an hour—he never remembered things like that—he would fail to answer, and she would hear the rattle of his typewriter. When she opened his door and said, "Supper's ready, Frank," he would stare at her blankly as though he didn't recognize her, and say, "What's that? Who? Oh, half a minute until I finish this accursed paragraph."

Then perhaps his typewriter ribbon would get twisted—he was working on a second-hand typewriter—and he would go white in the face as though some devil were torturing him, and cry out like a wounded animal, and get angry with his machine so that the ribbon became unmanageable and writhed about him.

"Let me put it right, Frank," said his mother quietly, alarmed by this nerve storm.

She had to put everything right, and sometimes sighed because he would never learn from experience or be in the least degree tidy and methodical. He left his muddy boots in the bathroom, and she carried them downstairs so that they might be cleaned in the morning by a boy who came in. He left his hat—not a very good-looking hat—in the garden, and she brought it in because it might rain in the night. He forgot to turn out the lamps when he was working late, and she had to creep down, when he had gone to bed, to put them out. He left his safety-razor blades wet so that they rusted, unless she dried them on a towel which she had hung on a peg for that very

purpose, though he never saw it. Sometimes he was so long in the bathroom that she became panic-stricken. Perhaps he was ill! Perhaps he was dead! He had been there an hour or more, and she hadn't heard the water splash.

"Frank! Are you all right? What's the matter?"

"Eh? Oh, Lord, yes. I've just had an idea. It would make a marvellous short story if I could get the end right."

She had to pay a high price for the privilege of mothering a literary man. She called him that, though he hated the name. Sometimes she was sorry that he had taken to writing books, although she was proud of him. He might have been happier as a doctor in a quiet practice. This writing seemed to take too much out of him. And yet he liked it, when something he was writing was going well. At these times there was a quiet happiness in his eyes. He sang to himself in that little room upstairs—always the same little tune, which was "Auprès de ma blonde," over and over again.

" '*Auprès de ma blonde*
Qu'il fait bon, fait bon, fait bon,
Auprès de ma blonde
Qu'il fait bon dormir!' "

He had learnt the words in France and did not think of their meaning. He was shy of all women, and his mother was glad of it. There was no woman quite worthy of him, she believed, and if he married she would lose his comradeship, which was the only thing she lived for. Not that she would set her face against his marriage, if he ever made up his mind to it. She was not one of those vampire mothers.

When he was not worrying in his mind, because of his writing, or because of unemployment in England, or because France had gone into the Ruhr, or because America stayed out of the League of Nations, or because now and then he had some ache in his heart which she didn't understand, he was humorous, light-hearted, and extraordinarily boyish, so that sometimes it was hard for her to believe that he was a grown-up man who had been through the World War, wounded and then taken prisoner. He set up a wireless apparatus and amused himself in the evenings by trying for foreign stations, with frightful squeaks and howls from the instrument, until he announced excitedly that he had got Berlin—or Moscow—or Rome. He became a desperate gardener and neglected his work for digging and hoeing or cutting down thistles or clearing the undergrowth from a little copse at the end of their field. He loved the tall foxgloves that lived in that copse, and was ecstatic about the bluebells which grew there in spring, and would sit

for hours under a big oak tree which stood among the silver birches, pretending to think out new ideas, but really watching the birds that peered at him through the leaves, and an occasional rabbit which scuttled through the bracken, and two young squirrels who were fearless of him.

There was one period, shortly after their move from London, when he was bitten with the idea that he might take up painting as a hobby. He was shy about that at first, and came back from London one day with a mysterious-looking parcel which he endeavoured to sneak past his mother's watchful eyes.

"What have you got there?" she asked suspiciously, because of that shy, self-conscious look with which he was taking it upstairs.

He laughed nervously.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I've been buying a few oil paints. I thought I might have a shot at putting down some of this country stuff on canvas. Words are inadequate, I find. One wants colour."

"What about your work?" she asked. "I'm getting a little anxious. No checks coming in!"

"Oh, that's all right. Just a hobby in odd hours."

It was a painful episode in Mrs. Brandon's life with this eccentric son to whom she was utterly devoted. He came back from the village with strange bottles obtruding from his coat pocket. They contained linseed oil and turpentine. He abandoned writing for days at a time and failed to come back to lunch after setting forth with a large palette, a sketching stool, the linseed oil and the turpentine, a fold-up easel, eight long brushes, and a box full of paint tubes. He returned looking self-conscious and perturbed.

"It's more difficult than I thought," he remarked. "I expect it requires a lifetime of devotion. But I wish to God I had taken up painting instead of writing. I find it fascinating beyond all words. How about those trees and the sunlight on that field? Any good, do you think?"

She thought the trees were wonderful, although she had never seen trees quite like that. But she was distressed by the effect of art upon his clothes. There was a smudge of green right down the front of his jacket. There was a smear of yellow on his right cuff. A good deal of his palette had transferred itself to his trousers.

"For heaven's sake, Frank!" she cried, "what have you been doing? That's your second-best suit. It's a disgrace!"

"Oh, a little turpentine will bring that off," he answered carelessly, but it didn't, in spite of all her efforts. That oil painting obsessed him for at least

three weeks and spoilt a perfectly good pair of gray flannel trousers, a pullover, three shirts, and a pair of pajamas in which he had put some finishing touches to one of his masterpieces before breakfast. Mrs. Brandon discovered smears of paint on the colour-washed wall, above the piano, where he had placed a sketch to see it in the evening light, and on a new deck chair, where he had left some wet brushes, and in the bathroom, where he had washed them, and even in the kitchen, where he had scraped his palette clean one evening. The crisis came one afternoon when she saw with horror a trail of yellow paint up the stair carpet leading from the hall along the passage to his room. She tapped at his door and entered and found him down on his hands and knees scrubbing the carpet—they had bought it in the Tottenham Court Road—with a wet nailbrush.

For once her patience was exhausted.

"Frank!" she cried angrily. "Either you give up oil painting or I give up looking after you! It's intolerable. There's paint everywhere, and you're neglecting your work, and we're getting into debt—and your pictures are frightful, anyhow!"

He was exceedingly abashed.

"I trod on one of these damn tubes," he said. "I'm frightfully sorry. I'm afraid this painting game is too complicated."

He rose to his feet, looking thoughtfully at the wet nailbrush, and then stealing a glance at his mother, who suddenly sat down in a chair and laughed at him until the tears came into her eyes. He really looked too absurd with his hair all ruffled, and a smudge of yellow down the right side of his face, and that wet nailbrush in his hand.

Then he laughed too, overcome by the consciousness of his own absurdity, and presently went over to his mother and put his arms about her.

"What a prize ass I am!" he said. "For heaven's sake, don't tell Val Foster. It's because I get so keen on things. As if beauty can be caught on a canvas without a lifetime of labour! . . . I suppose they are rather frightful."

He looked at his adventures in art and was suddenly appalled by the horror of the things he had thought so good.

"They're not frightful really," said Mrs. Brandon, "and I could bite my tongue out for saying such a thing. That was my temper. They're wonderful!"

"They're deplorable," said Brandon.

That night he made a bonfire of them, and his mother wept a little because she had blurted out the dreadful truth about them. But she was glad

when he went back to his writing. They were really very hard up, although her son was so distinguished among the little intellectual crowd who could appreciate his genius, poor dear.

8

BRANDON became friendly with the Avenel family. It was impossible not to become friendly with the Avenels. They were embarrassingly neighbourly. Mrs. Avenel invited Mrs. Brandon to tea and was very kind and gracious. She sent down baskets of red currants and raspberries and pots of jam, homemade by Sylvia, who had abandoned that hat shop in Knightsbridge, and enormous cauliflowers.

"I'm afraid she thinks we don't get enough to eat, Frank," remarked Mrs. Brandon. "Still, these little gifts are very acceptable. I must say, I think it's very kind of her."

Colonel Avenel walked about a good deal with a black spaniel at his heels, and Brandon met him on the heath above his cottage or leaning over gates looking at a distant view, or superintending the cutting up of some big trees which had fallen in a great storm. He always said, "Good-morning!" very cheerfully, and one day stopped Brandon, who wanted to stride by after touching his hat to this good-looking neighbour—he was a lean, gray-haired, hatchet-faced man with a little white moustache—who was the father of that pretty Audrey.

"Nice day!" he said.

"Splendid!" said Brandon, unable to pass him in this narrow lane, because he stood there squarely in the middle of the road.

"You're the young fellow at Willowbrook Cottage," said Colonel Avenel, as though Brandon might not be aware of it.

"Write things, don't you?" he asked, when Brandon had agreed to this fact.

"Now and then," said Brandon, as though admitting a secret vice.

"Wonderful!" said the Colonel. "I don't do much reading beyond the *Morning Post*, but I respect a man who can write things. It's a great gift. One of my ancestors was a writing man in the time of Queen Elizabeth. Sir Richard Avenel. He was executed in the Tower as a Papist. He wrote a sonnet the night before his head was chopped off. Pretty sporting that, eh?"

Brandon looked at this elderly colonel with a new interest when he mentioned the name of his ancestor. He was the author of that famous sonnet, "My soul is like a prisoned bird."

"I can't remember how it goes," said the Colonel. "It's not in my line, you know. I've been too busy with soldiering. India, South Africa, Egypt. India mostly. Now, those fellows in Parliament are giving away the Indian Empire to a group of revolutionary Babus who are discontented because they can't get government jobs after picking up a few Western ideas at King's College and Balliol. Tragic!"

Brandon did not make any comment. That subject was outside his range of knowledge. Secretly, he had a little sympathy with Gandhi because the fellow disliked industrial machinery and wished to maintain the old handicrafts.

Colonel Avenel stared across the hedge at a field of thistles.

"They used to grow wheat in that field," he said, as though it had some remote connection with India. "Now, all the arable land is being turned over to grass unless it's sold to speculating builders. Agriculture doesn't pay in this country, and the landowners are being ruined by income tax and death duties. All the old estates are being sold for building plots. I shudder to think what this place will be like in another fifty years. Villa residences, bungalows, bricks and mortar everywhere, and my old house a residential hotel for week-end golfers. That's what they call progress. The advance of democracy. Socialism in our time. Well, they may be right. I'm very old-fashioned!"

He laughed good-naturedly, with a crowd of little wrinkles puckering about his eyes—light brown eyes like those of his daughter Audrey.

"Come and see my girls," he said. "They get very bored with themselves, I'm afraid. Restless, you know, like most of the young people nowadays."

He whistled to his spaniel, raised his hand, and went down the lane with a straight back and stiff knees.

"A good type," thought Brandon, glad to be left to his thoughts again. He was a country gentleman of the old sort who had once been the backbone of England, when the squirearchy had had it all their own way. The elder sons had gone into the army and fought for England in foreign fields. The younger sons had gone into the Church with fat livings. They had built up a tradition of caste in their old manor houses, and produced beautiful women who grew into sturdy old ladies, and they had kept up the breed of horses,

and had gone into Parliament now and then, voting against any social change and never opening their mouths. Now they were disappearing, killed by industrialism, and the advance of democracy, and the costs of a great war, and the time of transition changing all social conditions.

Brandon met the Colonel's daughter Audrey one day. She was in a diminutive car with a bag of golf sticks stuck through one of the windows, and she slowed down behind him and then stopped with a friendly wave of the hand. It was impossible to disregard her.

"Had a good game?" asked Brandon, hoping she would not notice the smear of yellow on his left trouser leg from his adventures in painting.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"A round with the vicar's daughter over at Langdon. Not a man on the horizon. A conversation about Girl Guides. Hopeless!"

"Don't you approve of Girl Guides?" asked Brandon with a laugh. He admired them himself.

"Oh, they're all right. . . . Aren't you getting very bored down here after London?"

"Not in the least," said Brandon. "It's all very pleasant hereabouts. Beyond all words beautiful, don't you think?"

"One can't live on beauty," said Audrey Avenel. "I want interests. Something to do beyond golf and the gramophone. An exchange of ideas with an intelligent male now and then. Are you writing another novel?"

"Trying to," said Brandon. He always shirked talking about his work.

"A love story?" asked Audrey with smiling curiosity.

He admitted that one couldn't avoid the subject of love. Not entirely.

"Why avoid it?" she asked. "Isn't it rather important?"

"It's one phase of human relationship," he said. "Perhaps its interest is rather exaggerated nowadays by certain writers."

"Do you think so?"

She did not seem to agree with him, but did not pursue the subject.

"Come and talk to Father one evening," she said in a friendly way. "He likes discussing the doom of England with sympathetic minds. But perhaps you don't believe in the doom of England?"

"I haven't made up my mind about it," said Brandon cautiously. "Apart from the unemployed——"

Audrey Avenel laughed.

"If you want to avoid that discussion, Sylvia and I could entertain you with lighter conversation. My sister Sylvia is quite intelligent at times."

She waved her hand through the little window, started her car, and sped down the road.

A pretty girl, thought Brandon. In his mind he compared her with one of Shakespeare's young women. Rosalind, perhaps, who wore her breeches with a boyish swagger. Some of these modern girls, he thought, were harking back to the Elizabethan spirit, before the Puritans had brought gloom and prudery into English life. They had the frankness of speech, the unabashed manners, the sense of freedom in their limbs and minds, which seemed to have been the character of Shakespeare's Celias and Audreys and Katherines. Perhaps country girls of the old families had never quite lost that spirit.

There were other encounters with Audrey Avenel. He suspected her once or twice of waylaying him. It was curious, anyhow, that she should drive her little car along the grassy tracks of the heath to a place on the edge of a sandpit where he wrote a bit of his novel now and then when it was too fine to stay indoors, writing it in a penny exercise book bought in the village stores and typing it afterwards in the evening.

She hoped she was not interrupting his noble thoughts—she was certainly interrupting his thoughts, noble or not—and sat down beside him with her hands clasped round her knees, after flinging her hat into the heather, and talked amusingly and frankly about books and life. She was an omnivorous reader of his successful rivals. She specialized on Aldous Huxley and D. H. Lawrence, whom she described as poisonous but revealing.

"They tell us things about life we can't find down in sheltered Surrey," she explained.

"Why find out?" asked Brandon, who was surprised to know that this girl had read such authors. She was not a Lydia Beaumont who was the last word in sophistication and held forth at the Palette Club with hair-raising candour.

"One ought to know," said Audrey Avenel. "There's nothing in life that I don't want to find out."

Brandon smiled behind the stem of his pipe.

"It'll take you all your time," he said. "I'm trying to find out a little myself, but I haven't got very far yet. Not as far as why that ant obeys the

law of its tribe. Good heavens, if I knew that, I should be a remarkably wise fellow!"

Together they watched a little party of ants busy on their lawful occasions on the other side of a dried leaf.

"You must have felt like that during the war," said Audrey. "Under some invisible and unescapable discipline, controlling your life whether you liked it or not."

He looked at her sideways. . . . She was probably about twenty, and the war had been over ten years.

"How do you know that?" he asked with raised eyebrows.

"I read a good deal," she told him. "All the war books. I may even say that I do a bit of thinking now and then, strange as it may appear."

It did appear strange to Francis Brandon. This girl had an unsophisticated look and "that schoolgirl complexion" advertised by the soap makers.

She met his sideways glance and smiled.

"Oh, I don't pretend to be a highbrow! There's no chance of that in this secluded vale, with an old-fashioned father and mother who get shocked if I mention the word 'sex' and grow pale if I come home after midnight from a party in town."

Brandon put in a word for the parents. "I daresay they get anxious if you're driving in the dark."

Audrey continued her revelation of home life.

"It's a terrible thing to be sheltered, don't you think? Father would like to build high walls round us—they're pretty high as it is—and keep us away from the vulgar modern world which encroaches upon his ancestral pastures and puts another shilling on his income tax."

"I don't blame him," said Brandon. "But he can't do it."

"He wants to keep us in purdah, like the Indian women. I have to smuggle in the books I read. When Sylvia went into a hat shop just to get a look at life, Father was horrified. He thinks we ought to be perfectly happy at Harley Hall, looking after the herbaceous borders and going to local garden parties, where he meets all the old gentlemen who used to play polo with him a thousand years ago. It isn't good enough! Sylvia and I want to escape. We must escape somehow, to save our souls."

Brandon smiled behind his pipe.

"That's odd! We seem to meet at the crossroads. I've escaped from London with the same idea."

He remembered that comic telegram he had sent to Lydia Beaumont. *I am trying to save my soul in Surrey.* There had been a little truth at the back of it. He wanted to think things out away from the wear and tear of London traffic and the chit-chat of literary and artistic cliques and the drab monotony of mean streets.

"You'll soon get tired of distant views and dicky-birds," said Audrey with conviction. "They're very dulling to the intellect."

She sat next to him, with her hands clasped round her knees, while the breeze tossed her fair hair about, and he did not resent this interruption of his thoughts.

9

THEY were pleasant neighbours to have—the Avenel family—and although Brandon was not a social bird, as he remarked now and then, he slipped gradually into being a frequent visitor at their old house, and lost his sense of shyness with them. Mrs. Avenel had taken a fancy to him—Brandon had an idea that she thought he wanted feeding up and did not get enough to eat—and he had a feeling sometimes that she regarded him as a perfectly safe companion for her two daughters because of his poverty and the difference of years between them—twelve years older than Audrey, who was twenty-one. A safe old bachelor! Well, perfectly true, though sometimes he did not care to be thought so safe as all that, so completely out of the running with youth and beauty.

She herself was still beautiful, at something under fifty, with Audrey's light hair and fresh complexion, though matronly and tending to plumpness, and although she was not at all intellectual and her mental horizon was limited to Surrey gardens and this old house, she had a good nature and a sense of humour which made her charming.

She confided in him now and again about her daughters—"giving us away," as they said, when they observed these private conversations.

"They're so restless," she said once when she walked with him in her rose garden and then sat in a little summerhouse looking on to the tennis lawn where Audrey and Sylvia were playing tennis with their brother and a handsome dark young man who had driven up in a racing car in time for tea

on this Saturday afternoon. Brandon regretted that as a literary man and a Londoner he had never learnt to play that game, and, anyhow, was not properly dressed for it, as his wardrobe did not run to white flannels.

"Restless?" he asked politely. "Aren't we all like that? Looking for things we can't get?"

Mrs. Avenel sighed.

"Yes, indeed! But at my age one tries to learn resignation."

She spoke about Audrey and Sylvia again.

"They're so dissatisfied with their home life. And yet I try to make it pleasant for them. I can't make them out. Sometimes they alarm me—Sylvia especially. I have no control over her at all."

Brandon looked over to the tennis lawn where Sylvia was playing against her brother and sister with the dark young man as her partner. She missed an easy serve and cried out a mild swear word, and then glanced over towards her mother and laughed.

"Keep your eye on the ball, old dear!" cried Audrey.

"When she went into that hat shop," said Mrs. Avenel, "she made some rather queer friends in London. Shabby young men used to come down here when she returned for the week-ends, and she became engaged for a time to a middle-aged man who was very common and dropped his aitches. Her father and I were horrified."

"I'm not surprised," said Brandon in his sympathetic way, which made him popular with middle-aged women.

"She is perfectly good really," said Mrs. Avenel, "but very rebellious of what used to be called the proprieties in my young days. Both she and Audrey say the most alarming things. Honestly, they make me blush sometimes."

She blushed a little now at the very thought of those alarming utterances by her two pretty daughters, and then laughed quietly.

"All these young people are very free-spoken nowadays. One has to accept it, I suppose."

"There's no harm in it," said Brandon. "I'm all for frankness, although I'm a shy bird myself. What happened to the middle-aged gentleman?"

Mrs. Avenel lowered her voice.

"He turned out to be a married man with four children."

"A lucky escape for Sylvia," said Brandon.

"Good heavens, yes. We are rather anxious for her to get fond of that good-looking man over there. He's the son of a friend of ours—Mr. Jerningham—and the grandson of the old lady whom you may have seen about the village. She lives in that Georgian house on the green. Very deaf and very amusing. She forgets everything, poor old dear, except things which happened forty years ago."

She was thoughtful for a moment and then sighed again.

"I'm afraid she'll skip off again."

"The old lady?" asked Brandon, rather puzzled.

Mrs. Avenel laughed in her good-natured way.

"No, Sylvia. She's talking of a tea shop in the Brompton Road. As if this garden isn't better than a tea shop! With everything to make life pleasant, although we are rather poverty-stricken."

It was a walled garden filled with flowers. The spirit of Sylvia—and of Audrey, her sister—wanted to climb over those garden walls and leave this sheltered life, remote from adventure. Brandon could understand that, though he had come into the country for quietude. One had to get experience, and taste liberty, and break away from parental discipline, even when it was as gentle as Mrs. Avenel's. He could understand both points of view, being halfway in age between the mother and the daughter.

"Audrey is just the same," said Mrs. Avenel, "only she has more loyalty to her father and a steadier character. She ought to get married really. I think she wants to, poor dear. Only eligible young men are so scarce nowadays, especially in the country. I suppose you couldn't introduce her to any agreeable young men who could afford to give her a nice home?"

Brandon smiled and thought of his own friends. Val Foster, who lived in a studio off the King's Road, where he slept behind a curtain if he was not wandering abroad and staying in French inns where they charged him five francs a day, *vin compris*; or Julian Bell, who had once sold picture postcards to American tourists, dressed as a Dutchman on the quay at Vollendam; and young literary men who lived in bed-sitting rooms in Oakley Street and Ebury Street, and East End parsons with big families, and officers he had known in the war, now living in cheap bungalows trying to make a living out of poultry farms or tea gardens.

"I'm afraid my friends are extremely impecunious," he told her.

She glanced at his clothes, and looked at him in a motherly way, with a hint of compassion.

"It's a nuisance being hard up, isn't it? But I thought authors earned so much money nowadays! Aren't there such things as best sellers?"

"There are indeed," said Brandon with his faint smile. "But they are far removed from my humble sphere. They live richly on the Riviera. They lunch haughtily at the Savoy Hotel. I have never met them in the cheaper restaurants of the Pimlico Road."

"Well," said Mrs. Avenel, "I'm sure they ought to be obliged to Audrey. She reads all their novels. And terrible they are, some of them. Nothing but sex."

"That's the secret," said Brandon darkly. "If I wrote more about that subject I might become a best seller."

"Then you never will," said Mrs. Avenel cheerfully. "You're not like that, Mr. Brandon. I feel perfectly safe to leave my daughters with you, and I'm so glad that Audrey and you get on so well. She loves talking to you about books and things. I'm sure you will have a good influence over her. It's a privilege, I'm sure."

"On the contrary," said Brandon humbly.

Once again he was made to feel that he was absurdly safe with a pretty girl. Probably there was something the matter with his face—hag-haunted by writing unsuccessful novels—and the old torture of a half-forgotten war which had spoilt his boyhood and left its brand on him ten years afterwards.

The tennis players came towards the summerhouse, talking loudly.

"A rotten set," said young Avenel. "You played like a kitten chasing its own tail, Sylvia."

"I'll chase your tail, my child," said Sylvia, "with the hard end of my racket."

"Don't be obscene before your mother," replied the boy with a gravity that was only belied by the flick of an eyelid.

"Has Mother been giving us away again?" asked Audrey. "Has she been denouncing our rebel spirits?"

"Certainly not," said Mrs. Avenel hastily and with a faint blush which was a confession of guilt. "Mr. Brandon and I were talking about literature."

Audrey laughed with considerable amusement.

"Oh, Mother, as if you knew anything about that, beyond stories in the *Woman at Home*."

"Well, I'm sure they're nicer than some of the things you read!" said Mrs. Avenel.

Audrey laughed at her and turned to Brandon.

"You don't know Mr. Jerningham, do you? Here he is, anyhow. Mr. Jerningham—Mr. Brandon. Two great intellects."

Brandon was aware of being summed up, judged, and sentenced to death, socially, by an extremely handsome young man who nodded to him and said, "How-do-you-do?" and then, ignoring his presence in the world, lit an expensive-looking cigarette. He was a young man of about twenty-six, with a face which reminded Brandon of the young Byron, because of its fine profile and the poise of his head, a suggestion emphasized by the low collar of his tennis shirt, open at the neck. Harrow and Christ Church, thought Brandon, and he reckoned him up as just too young to have got into a war in which great numbers of his kind died in the usual way.

"Have you heard from Pearl lately?" asked Mrs. Avenel.

Jerningham nodded, with a smile which showed his white teeth under a little dark moustache.

"She's not a prolific correspondent. But I get picture postcards now and then. She's rather bored in a cheap hotel on the Riviera—Mentone, as a matter of fact."

"Lucky for her!" said Audrey. "What's the latest love affair?"

The dark young man knotted his brow thoughtfully.

"The latest? Oh, well, I daresay I've missed some. But I did hear of a Russian prince—unless he was a hairdresser or a *gigolo*—who became rather amorous when Pearl was watching the battle of flowers. She had to tick him off."

"What adventures!" cried Audrey. "How much we miss at Harley Green."

"And your father?" asked Mrs. Avenel, after slapping a daughter's hand reprovingly.

"Trying out a new system," said the young man called Jerningham. "Pearl thinks they won't be able to pay the hotel bills."

"So very rash!" said Mrs. Avenel. "I shall have to talk to him quite seriously."

Young Jerningham was amused.

"Nothing will cure my honoured father's passion for a little flutter now and then. Meanwhile, I toil in town, trying to revive the family fortunes by seeking briefs in the Temple—mostly without success."

Brandon took his leave on the plea of having work to do. This family group was amusing and interesting and charming. That walled garden was a good scene. He might work it into a novel one day. He was getting new characters in Surrey, enlarging his knowledge of English life, which had been too limited to London.

Audrey prepared to walk with him as far as the gate.

"Sure you must go?" she asked.

"A new chapter," he told her.

She made big eyes as though deeply impressed.

"A masterpiece, I'm sure," she was kind enough to say.

It was unfortunate that young Jerningham should have had a clear and rather penetrating voice, which Brandon heard halfway across the lawn.

"Who's that seedy-looking chap? The piano tuner?"

Audrey coloured up and glanced at Brandon to see whether he had heard and saw that he had.

"A handsome lad," she said, "but no manners and few morals. I'm sorry he made a silly remark like that."

"Perfectly reasonable," Brandon assured her with a smile. "But I daresay I should be better dressed if I happened to be the piano tuner."

Audrey gave him her hand at the gate.

"Good luck to the chapter. I hope to read it one day."

"I'll send you a free copy," said Brandon. "It's the only way I can get people to read my books, and then some of them don't."

He strode across the field which was a short cut to his cottage. Twenty minutes later he was sitting in front of his typewriter. But he didn't write very much. There was a glamorous light over the hills beyond the woods of Surrey. It was so much better than the view he had had over the chimney pots in Pimlico. It was worth watching. He was a lover of beauty, and tried to put it into words sometimes, and failed hopelessly.

10

Brandon went up to town now and then. There were times when, in spite of his new devotion to rural life, he felt the need of getting away from Surrey

lanes and heaths for contact with humanity in the mass, even though it was only a walk up the Strand or traffic-dodging across Trafalgar Square. These people were his people. He was writing about their lives. This city was his city, with its rhythm in his mind, though he had retired into a back garden away from its noise and its nerve-racking rush of life. Now and again it was good to hang onto a strap in a crowded tube train, and to look over the shoulder of a little typist girl, reading a novel between Hyde Park Corner and Piccadilly—never one of his!—with as much concentration of mind as though she were in one of the glades on Harley Heath. It amused him to order an egg on toast and a cup of coffee in a Fleet Street tea shop where he had often gone as a sub-editor on a daily paper which had nearly killed him. The waitress recognized him and gave him a friendly word.

"Quite a stranger!"

"Yes. I'm living in the country now."

"Lucky for you! It must be nice. And it's done you good, too. You're looking better, I will say."

An impatient young man in a bowler hat called out from another table.

"Now, miss. What about that jam roll?"

"Well, what about it? I can't wait on everybody at once, can I?"

Exactly the same. The life he had known went on without him just as he had dropped it when he left Fleet Street. There was the same group of clerks playing dominoes in the luncheon hour. They had been doing it every day at the same time while he had been cultivating his private paradise, and exploring its solitudes, and building up a narrative of imaginary lives like these.

In Fleet Street one of his former colleagues stopped him and said, "Hullo, old man!" and gave a whimsical look at his gray flannel trousers.

"Having a look at the old haunts? I expect you're glad to escape from the desk."

"How are things?" asked Brandon. "The same old grind?"

"Worse!" said his journalistic friend. "Fleet Street has become a soulless machine. We're the machine minders, and some of us get caught in the wheels and no compensation for wounded souls. As a matter of fact, I had a row with the chief last week. I've got the sack—and the wife had a baby last week."

"Rough luck!" said Brandon. "I'm very sorry to hear that." He referred to the "sack" and not to the baby.

"I suppose I couldn't touch you for a quid?" asked his friend, after further revelations of the newspaper world. "Sorry to ask you, but you know how it is. As a successful novelist and so forth . . ."

Brandon smiled at the phrase "successful novelist" and made excuses regarding the "quid."

"My novels hardly pay for my week's washing."

He managed to escape without loss, but decided that he would have to send a check for the amount asked, when he received payment for his weekly article. It must be perfectly ghastly walking Fleet Street without a job, with a wife and baby to keep at home. In spite of his own poverty, he had escaped giving hostages to fortune to that extent.

That was what made him careful in the presence of pretty girls like Audrey Avenel. People never guessed how susceptible he was to feminine attractions. They thought him a celibate soul, whereas he desired the love of women more than most men, perhaps, being a bit of a sentimentalist, he supposed. There were times when he saw the danger signal. It was no use falling in love on an uncertain income hardly enough to keep his end up, with occasional doles to impecunious relatives, and the luxury of shedding odd half-crowns to fellows who were down and out.

He had a look at some etchings through the plate-glass windows of a shop in the Strand and was aware of a girl standing by his side. She was there again when he stopped in front of another shop where there were some cheap ties and socks.

"Up from the country?" she asked, with a sideways smile.

"Not farther than Surrey," he answered politely, with a slight flush of embarrassment.

"Oh, I thought you were a country cousin. Doing anything this afternoon? If you would like to come and see my rooms—just off the Pimlico Road——"

"No, thanks very much. Sorry!"

He moved away and saw her shrug her shoulders slightly. She was quite a nice-looking girl, neatly dressed, and she spoke good English. He felt desperately sorry for her. But he wasn't tempted by that kind of affair. He had certain ethical standards which, in a way, were utterly illogical because not founded on any definite faith, out of which he had slipped. He would feel degraded and ashamed if he yielded to the lure of a curbstone adventure. Some of the men he knew would argue theoretically that there was no harm in that sort of thing, that there was positive good in it because it liberated the

mind from the obsession of repressed instincts. He couldn't agree to that. Although he had given up any definite form of religion, there was an old Puritan strain in him, due to his early upbringing and some family heritage of thought and character. He believed in self-control, although advanced minds like that of Lydia Beaumont were always talking of self-expression. He was a traditionalist, really, in every department of life, including art and writing. Perhaps that was why his books were not a success. His mind had lagged behind the times.

He was certain of that when he dropped into the Pen and Palette Club now and then. The old crowd was there, sitting around in the leather chairs, smoking innumerable cigarettes, carrying on heated arguments about new books and new movements in art, and the new morality, which seemed to him the old immorality disguised under the jargon of psychoanalysis and intellectual Bolshevism. But it was verbal, mostly. These professional women—artists, musicians, writers of all kinds, who talked loudly and glibly about Freud and Adler, were leading hard-working and respectable lives, as far as he knew. It was only an intellectual pose of theirs to indulge occasionally in conversational improprieties.

Some of them professed to admire the work of a literary maniac praised by certain critics, but he was quite certain they had never read a line of that demon-haunted mind. Some of these middle-aged women praised with rather hysterical enthusiasms the grossness of certain war novels which had lately been the vogue. He had read some of them with interest and emotion. Certainly they had stripped the war of any false glamour which it might have for youth, and some of them had been written in blood and agony, but most of them had falsified the war by dragging in sex stuff which had no place in the normal experience of trench life and billets. Men were too tired to worry much about that side of life. There were no women within reach of No Man's Land, nor within forty miles of the front line. Some of these novelists of war had gone to latrines for their inspiration and had overloaded their pages with blasphemy and obscenity having very little to do with war, which he hated as much as they did. These things, anyhow, were trivial in relation to the great ordeal, and accidental to the spirit of the men. Personally, as a writing man, he shrank from the foul word and the obscene incident. By all his training in decency he was inhibited from that grossness.

Some of the members greeted him with a wave of the hand or raised eyebrows, as he stood for a moment at the door of the smoking room, looking at the pictures on the walls—those grotesque nudes, those drunken houses and streets without perspective, and landscapes which were strangely different from those in Surrey. They had been perpetrated by the members.

They symbolized the spirit of modern art and the new ideas. They had almost scared him away when he was first introduced by Val Foster.

"Welcome, little stranger!" cried Cora Turtle, who wrote that remarkable book, *Passionate Indiscretions*. She had led him to a sofa one day and kept him prisoner for an hour while she talked of her yearning for motherhood, to his considerable alarm. He knew she kept an invalid sister, and was fond of her cat, and lent some of her hard-earned money to women at the club who were hard pushed at the end of the month.

"Didn't I hear that you had been living in Morocco with Arab chiefs?" asked Myrtle Vance. "Come and tell us about those shocking sheikhs. I expect they're nothing like their romantic portraits by that awful woman who gets twenty thousand pounds for a serial story—may God forgive her!"

She designed fashions for a woman's weekly and had assisted Lydia Beaumont in dragging him through fox trots on dance nights. Once she had threatened to box his ears for treading on her toes, and she had a heavy forearm. But he was fond of her. She pretended to read all the latest novels, and discussed their themes with considerable fluency, but he caught her out over one of Aldous Huxley's. She had read the review in the *Observer* and muddled it up with a book by Michael Arlen, with tragic confusion which would have disconcerted both those authors.

"I haven't been farther than Surrey," he told her, and this remark was greeted with loud laughter, as though he had said something extremely witty.

"Tell me, Frank," said Lettice Chasty who painted scenery for the old Vic, "What do you think of *The Virgin Woman*?"

"Who is she?" asked Brandon, in all innocence, and this remark also was hailed with a scream of delighted laughter.

"Now, what's all this?" asked a stern voice, imitating a policeman in pursuit of duty. It was Val Foster, who had broken away from a group of brother artists clustering at the bar.

"Mr. Brandon is being frightfully witty this afternoon," explained Lettice Chasty. "I didn't know he was such a humorist."

"I always said the lad would surprise the world one day," said Foster, putting a heavy paw on Brandon's shoulder and leaning on him heavily. "If he's not very careful he will get into the list of best sellers and lose his immortal soul."

"Shut up, Val!" cried Myrtle Vance. "Don't insult one of our idealists. Mr. Brandon might fall from grace by running off with a married woman—he's human, after all—but he wouldn't do anything vulgar like that."

"Give the lad breathing space," said Foster, as two other women came up to him with little cries of surprise at seeing him again. One was Flora Chubb, the lady reporter of the *Morning Mercury*. He had been to her rooms in Cheyne Row, a few doors from Carlyle's house. She had kept him until after midnight, describing her experiences as a factory girl in Bermondsey. There was nothing she did not know about life in its most squalid haunts. There was nothing she wouldn't tell about it with alarming lack of reticence. But she was gay hearted and as good as gold.

The other woman was Miriam Brent, who did illustrations for children's books and had a secret passion for Val Foster which once she had confided to Brandon in a corner of the smoking room. Her husband had gone off with another woman, leaving her with a small boy whom she was educating out of her precarious earnings. She was desperately poor and always behind with her club subscription. Brandon had taken her out to lunch sometimes, suspecting that she stinted herself more than was good for her health. She had a large appetite for a little woman.

"Why, it's Frank Brandon!" she cried, with a sudden illumination in her tired eyes. "Where have you been all these months? I thought you were dead —or married."

"No such luck," said Brandon. "Still trying to write a novel which may get into a second edition with the help of kind friends."

"Come and smoke a cigarette with me."

"No," said Val Foster. "I won't have you batten on a man who listens to your tales of woe with disgusting sympathy which makes him the victim of confiding females. Come and have a drink, my lad. No more of this petting party. It's emasculating."

"I'm afraid I must be off," said Brandon. "I have to visit an impoverished aunt."

"It's the sort of person you would go and visit," said Val Foster. "You're an incurable sentimentalist."

It was not so much sentiment as stern duty which made Brandon visit that impoverished aunt who was his mother's sister, married to a man dying of cancer and taking an unconscionable time a-dying. They lived in a small house near Clapham Common, partly supported by their daughter Judy, short for Judith, who had a job in a city office and worked at home in the evenings typing the novels and stories of two or three members of the Pen and Palette Club to whom Brandon had recommended her. She was a pretty

slip of a girl, rather like what Brandon's mother must have been at her age, which was twenty-five, but she looked overworked and worried.

Her mother, Brandon's aunt Alice, was amazingly cheerful always, in spite of that poor husband dying by inches in the back bedroom upstairs, on indefinite leave from the Board of Trade. But it was the forced cheerfulness of spiritual courage, and Brandon sickened always at the faint and frightful aroma which came from that sick room and at the haunted look in the eyes of Judy.

Always he had to go upstairs and sit awhile with the dying man, Henry Martindale, who clasped his hand and told him to bring up the chair by the bedside, and discussed politics and the state of England with as much interest as though he were going to live to a ripe old age and would be personally affected by future conditions.

"I don't know how we shall carry on," he said once, "unless this country adopts protection. We're being invaded by cheap foreign goods. Worse still, the government is putting a premium on laziness. And people with a little capital are getting scared. I see by the latest reports of the great bankers that money is leaving the country rapidly. People of our class are at the mercy of all this socialist legislation."

He spoke as though he belonged to the old landed class like the Avenels, with his own capital in jeopardy, whereas his doctors were being paid by the hard work of poor Judy, typing until midnight sometimes after her daily job.

"I've brought you some flowers from my own garden," said Brandon, putting a big bunch of roses on his bed.

Mr. Martindale glanced at them with a word of thanks, but his mind was active in other directions.

"There's a very good letter in *The Times* to-day by one of our big employers of labour . . ."

Downstairs, Judy took him on one side.

"I'm getting fed up with this life, Frank. Father refuses to die. Those doctors ought to put him out of his agony."

"He still takes an interest in life," remarked Brandon.

"It's more than I do," said Judy.

She wept a little into a grubby handkerchief and then laughed.

"I get like this sometimes. Nerves, you know. Sorry!"

"How about the financial situation?" asked Brandon. "If I could be of any help . . . ?"

He was not at all sure that he could afford to be of help, but he was desperately sorry for this hard-worked little cousin.

"Oh, we can carry on all right. It's jolly decent of you, Frank, all the same. How's Aunt Kate? That cottage of yours sounds idyllic."

He kissed her on the cheek and said, "Keep your pecker up," and groaned when he walked away from that little house near Clapham Common. Poverty was ghastly when it was allied with illness. And it seemed worse in the suburbs. Poverty was not so squalid in a country cottage.

Then there was his sister Lucy and her fantastic husband. He had promised his mother to look them up; Lucy was going to have another baby. That was the third in five years, with a husband who lost his job periodically because of his political opinions which clashed with those of his latest editor. He was a descriptive reporter, generally sent to royal garden parties and the funerals of great men and the little pageants of London life. He had a brilliant style, with a sense of colour and the human touch, but he was a fierce and fanatical socialist, and he could not keep this view of life out of his copy. Sometimes it evaded the blue pencil of the sub-editors on conservative papers, to the great astonishment of readers of the *Morning Post* who found the trail of Karl Marx in a description of Ascot, and to the bewilderment of subscribers to the *Daily Mail* who found an attack upon the great industrialists in an otherwise pleasing article upon Spring in Kensington Gardens.

This eccentric brother-in-law, Martin Merrivale, was a tall, loose-limbed young man with fair hair which was almost golden and light blue eyes which had an expression of smiling irony. He was the son of a Canon of Canterbury who deplored his socialistic leanings, and he had drifted into Fleet Street after a brief and briefless experience at the Bar. Now he was Lucy's husband and at the moment out of a job again—she told him—after an unfortunate quarrel with the editor of the *Daily Express* who objected to a skit on Empire Day in Hyde Park which had been "spiked" by an intelligent sub-editor before it could wreck a patriotic leading article.

"Good heavens!" said Brandon. "That's the second journalist I've met to-day who has just got the sack."

Lucy confided to Brandon that she was getting worried.

"Of course Martin is absolutely adorable," she said, "but that doesn't pay the household bills, to say nothing of other expenses. Now I'm going to have another baby!"

It was the same story as that other journalist's. Brandon was astonished at the coincidence. No one would believe it if he put it in a novel.

"Can't you restrain his political ideas?" he asked. "Can't you suggest that he shouldn't let them creep into articles on Kensington Gardens?"

Lucy opened her eyes with astonishment.

"Frank! I didn't expect you to say a thing like that. Surely you wouldn't ask Martin to disguise his real beliefs?"

"No," said Brandon. "But he needn't obtrude them into descriptive articles. Besides . . ."

He was going to say something about the fallacy of the Socialistic argument but it would lead to a lot of explanation, and Lucy was not in a condition for that and wouldn't understand anyhow, being of a simple mind. He had been a Socialist himself after the war, more bitter than Martin. Now, lately, he was modifying his views. The time of bitterness had passed. He was beginning to see the other side of things—the weakness of democracy, the need of order and discipline, the danger of pauperizing the nation by giving too much for nothing. Perhaps Surrey was creeping into his mind. . . .

He met his brother-in-law coming up the steep flight of stone steps which led to a flat in a block of mansions overlooking Battersea Park. He was much better dressed than Brandon, in a suit of light gray with a sponge-bag tie.

"Hullo!" he cried cheerfully. "How's fiction?"

"Not very marketable," said Brandon.

"Lucy is going to have another baby," said Merrivale. "Meanwhile I'm sacked from that detestable rag. Ruin stares me in the face!"

He laughed as though ruin were extraordinarily amusing.

"What can one expect," he asked, "when one lives under a capitalist system which exploits the workers and sandbags the truth tellers? Fleet Street under its present monopolists has declared an unholy war against any expression of opinion which is likely to open the eyes of a deluded democracy. The sub-editorial blue pencil . . ."

He gave an amusing description of the anxiety with which his late sub-editor had scanned his copy, suspecting heretical opinions in the most innocent account of a fashionable wedding and a memorial service in the Abbey for a dead general.

For a moment his eyes strayed to Brandon's gray flannel trousers.

"Any use asking you for the loan of a little filthy lucre?"

He did not seem surprised when Brandon pleaded poverty.

"Well, I shall have to touch the old gentleman at Canterbury—overpaid for spiritual propaganda of a most ineffective kind. Give my love to your mother, won't you? Tell her that Lucy and I make a game of life. Those babies are adorable. They keep us laughing!"

He waved his hand and raced up the stone stairs three at a time.

So Brandon revisited his London friends and kept in touch with his impoverished relatives and heard the roar of buses down the Strand. Girls sitting opposite him in tube trains were aware of his gaze upon them and thought he didn't like the look of their knees. They didn't know that he was building up stories about their way of life and studying their faces for a moment while his imagination followed them into little homes in the suburbs. Now and again someone in a hurrying crowd met his eyes, watchful and searching and friendly, because he had recognized one of his characters in a novel of mean streets. His pulse beat to the rhythm of London again, but he was glad to get back to that country cottage across a field where two horses were on the sky-line, ploughing up the stubble after harvest, and where the fleecy clouds above a belt of trees were unobscured by chimney pots. But somehow, after these trips to town, he felt guilty of selfishness. This country cottage was an escape from the front-line trenches of the modern battle. It was a soft billet out of the firing line—but very pleasant. This quietude! That scent of new-mown grass! That light over the Sussex downs! Really, he had too much luck, he thought, as he reached out for his pipe and loaded it from a tin he had bought at the village stores.

11

BRANDON'S sanctuary of peace was not so remote from the world that he was spared the fears of invasion. The outposts of the enemy—the Philistines—reconnoitred his position and even penetrated to some of his private beauty spots which he had marked out as his own, though nominally they belonged, he supposed, to Lord Lamberton and other owners by vague title deeds which they did not enforce over sandy heaths and heather-clad hills. On Saturday afternoons and Sundays small parties of young men and women who had come down by the electric trains to Guildford from London suburbs explored the lanes not far from his cottage, climbed over stiles where rights of way were marked on the ordinance maps at which they

peered from time to time with noisy discussions, and picked bunches of wild flowers of which some of them knew the Latin names. They corresponded somewhat to the German Wandervögel—the Wandering Birds—whom he had seen once on a cheap holiday with Val Foster, though they wore more clothes and looked less romantic in "plus fours" and raincoats. Brandon had no grudge against them, and smiled as he passed.

He knew their type. Many a time he had stood in the gallery queue with them outside the Court Theatre when Bernard Shaw was on. He knew their style of humour, touched with a little horseplay by the younger men and rewarded by shrill gusts of laughter from girls who would one day preside over the classrooms of elementary schools. Some of them went hand-in-hand. Others sang *Three Blind Mice* in harmony. He wished them well, tried not to feel dog-in-the-mangerish because they wanted a share of nature in his own No Man's Land, but hoped they would walk towards the Hog's Back, or Newlands Corner, or anywhere but here.

He had more of a grudge against the motor-car folk who came out from town and parked themselves under the trees on the edge of Harley Heath, or in deeper glades round about, with thermos flasks and luncheon baskets and gramophones, which they set going with jazz tunes, outraging this tranquillity where birds were singing and leaves were whispering and a little soft breeze was playing through the grasses. He shuddered at this dreadful intrusion of noise and vulgarity and then rebuked himself because of his democratic conscience, and then argued in his secret thoughts that even democracy need not be so thick skinned, so damned vulgar, as all that. Surely they could get away from jazz sometimes! Why did they come into one of the last retreats of loveliness if they violated it by these hideous and filthy discords?

In the evenings, before dusk or afterwards, there were other cars parked in secret places, more aloof. They were young girls in short frocks—he had seen thousands of them between Knightsbridge and the Brompton Road in his morning walks in London—and they sat in two-seaters with young men of their own type who seemed to smoke innumerable cigarettes while they chatted in low voices as though even in Surrey glades they might be overheard, which was wise of them, thought Brandon, who passed by with a long, quiet stride. Love-making, of course, and he had no personal objection. Quite a nice way of making love, he thought, if one could afford that sort of thing and liked it.

There was one of these glade-secluded cars which Brandon came to know by sight in his evening walks across the heath to Harley Wood. It was

a long, rakish-looking car with a green body, and it arrived from the direction of London by way of Guildford, generally about nine o'clock on Thursday evenings, which coincided with his time for a last stroll in search of sunset, or the pearly glamour of that hour before dark when there was a hush over this countryside and nothing stirred but a startled rabbit in the undergrowth as he passed, and the birds were quiet after a day of song, and the world seemed unsubstantial. That green car intrigued him a little. It was generally camouflaged in a thicket of silver birches and tall bracken, not far from a disused sandpit on the edge of his usual track. Its owner was obviously waiting for someone, and passing the time by reading the evening paper in the light of a little lamp inside his car, which glowed dimly.

Brandon saw that it was a young man with a bowler hat at the back of his head. Once he stood by the side of the car, staring down the track towards Harley Green, and then retreated when Brandon's dark figure approaching quietly startled him.

"She cometh not," thought Brandon, and smiled as he passed. The eternal love chase. He was out of the running in that old game. Not one of the starters. Perhaps one day he would get caught by passionate desire and hang about like this at some crossroad of life for a girl who kept him waiting. So far he had evaded the excitement, or missed it, or dodged it, because of his financial handicap and a certain timidity with women. As a writing man he was a looker-on at life and busy with the imaginary characters who were sometimes more real to him than the people around him. He tapped them out on a typewriter behind a closed door, and resented the intrusion of reality. It was the inevitable penalty of this writing job—not quite healthy, really—too introspective, too aloof from the practical affairs of life. He wondered what sort of girl that young man was waiting for.

Then one evening he knew, and was slightly startled.

It was that little slip of a thing, Sylvia, the sister of Audrey Avenel. She came walking quickly along the sandy track and gave a sudden start like a frightened bird when she became aware of him, standing behind the shelter of a tree to light his pipe. It was almost dark, but he could see her bright eyes and pretty face, sharper-cut than Audrey's and as dainty as a miniature painted on porcelain.

"Sorry," he said. "Nice evening."

"Lovely, isn't it?" she answered. "I'm taking a bit of a stroll. It's rather stuffy indoors."

He was walking the same way, but decided that he had better turn off in a different direction. It wouldn't be fair to keep the young man waiting.

“Kind regards to your father and mother,” he said, lifting his hat and striding into the bracken at a tangent.

He could not help wondering whether her father and mother were aware of their daughter’s evening stroll towards a green-bodied car with a rakish body. Well, it was none of his business, and as a novelist he was not hostile to romance on Harley Heath. Two thousand years ago a Roman soldier might have waited here beyond the camp for some British maiden stealing out of a mud hut where Harley Hall now stood. That moon appearing in a pale sky had looked down on many meetings of this kind. It was the same old human nature in spite of motor cars and bowler hats . . . and the penalties of breaking the social code or going outside the laws of caste or tribe were just about the same. Sex had always been guarded by taboos, with cruel punishment for those who broke them. This modern idea of freedom didn’t work, really. A girl like Sylvia would get into trouble all right if she broke away from the family tradition and the ethics of her crowd. She couldn’t afford to risk it, although she found it “rather stuffy indoors” and was hurrying towards a green car. No wonder Mrs. Avenel was worried sometimes. . . .

Brandon met Sylvia again at about the same hour in the same neighbourhood, and she laughed when she met him and said, “You here again?” with a slight edge to her voice as though vexed to see him.

“I generally take a turn this way,” he explained. “One gets the last light in the sky up here.”

It was later when he met her again—very late indeed, being eleven o’clock, with the moon up and scurrying clouds across a threatening sky. Brandon had been working after supper and was brain fagged. He knew that he wouldn’t sleep if he went to bed with that last chapter in his mind and a problem of construction nagging at him. He had taken his lantern out to light him up the dark lane and then had walked into this moonlight on the heath.

It was his turn to be startled when Sylvia Avenel appeared before him like a little gray ghost from behind the clump of birch trees on the edge of the sand pit. The green car was disappearing down the road beyond, with its headlights lighting up the trees and giving a white radiance to the sky as it turned steeply uphill.

“Good-evening, Mr. Brandon,” said Sylvia. “Quite a nice moon to-night, isn’t there?”

She spoke as though it were perfectly natural for her to be walking across a lonely heath at eleven o’clock at night, but he detected a slight tremor in her voice.

“A very useful moon,” said Brandon. “This heath is difficult going in the dark. Shall I walk back with you?”

“Do!” she said.

They walked a little way without speaking. Brandon fumbled for his pipe and felt embarrassed. He would hate this girl to think that he was spying on her, but all the same he felt anxious about her. This was a lonely place for a girl to be walking at night. And that fellow in a bowler hat must be a cad to leave her so far from home. He might be an unspeakable cad who ought to be warned off the course.

Sylvia suddenly laughed nervously before she spoke.

“Of course, you know I’m not out here for the night air! You must have seen that green car.”

“Yes,” said Brandon. “Several times. On Thursday evenings, as a rule. It’s driven by a young man in a bowler hat.”

“Exactly,” said Sylvia. “You won’t say anything to my people about it, will you?”

Brandon hesitated for a moment. Mrs. Avenel and her family had been very good to him. He liked them and valued their friendship. He was not at all sure that he ought not to give a hint to Audrey that her sister was playing hide-and-seek in the danger zone. But he promised not to be indiscreet.

“I knew you wouldn’t,” said Sylvia. “Audrey says you understand our point of view. The younger generation’s, I mean.”

He felt a little stab at those words. As a man of thirty-three he did not like the idea of being placed among the older crowd by this girl of twenty or less. She talked as though he were old enough to be her father.

He disguised his moment of chagrin by a good-natured laugh.

“I’m all on the side of youth and romance, in spite of my advanced years. Does your sister know anything about the owner of the green car?”

Sylvia turned her head so that he could see the smiling glitter of her eyes in the bright moonlight about them.

“Oh, Audrey knows. We don’t keep much back from each other. I was referring to Father and Mother. They’re very old-fashioned, you know. Mediæval, in fact.”

Brandon felt relieved that Audrey knew about the secret car. She had a shrewd head on her shoulders and a healthy sense of humour.

“All the same,” he ventured, “if I had the honour to be your father, I should feel anxious about you. Isn’t it a bit risky being out so late on this

blasted heath?"

"Oh, perfectly safe," she assured him. "There are no wild beasts about."

Brandon was not quite sure about that. Some of these motorists looked rather wild and beast-like, he thought.

They came to the end of the lane where a path led over a stile to Harley Hall.

"Look here," he said, "I don't want to talk high old-fashioned ethics or anything like that, but if I were you I wouldn't meet that lad on Harley Heath, especially after dark. If your father found out there would be a row about it, wouldn't there?"

"Of the first order!" she admitted laughingly. "That's why I don't want you to say anything. Promise?"

"Word of honour."

She gave his hand a little squeeze as she said good-night.

"Thanks ever so much."

He saw her little gray figure skip over the stile and flit down the path to her father's house hidden behind a belt of trees.

Even in a Surrey backwater there was a lot to be learnt about human nature by a novelist who walked about the countryside.

12

Once or twice Brandon had a sense of panic, imagining that he saw some members of the Pen and Palette Club among the invaders of the heath. He could almost swear that he heard the cynical laughter of Mark Ambrose, the literary critic who killed a struggling novelist or two every Sunday in the *Onlooker*, skinned and scalped the latest works of the more famous writers of fiction, and gave ecstatic praise to the members of his own group. One evening Brandon imagined that he heard the low contralto voice of Lydia Beaumont, followed by a gust of laughter from two men whose cigarette ends glowed above the bracken which probably, he thought, they would set on fire with the careless habits of Chelsea and Maida Vale, just as they burnt the mantelpieces of their best friends. He hurried homewards much disturbed. It would be really awful if they invaded his retreat.

For a few moments there was a cold sweat on his forehead as he stood in his little sitting room, groping for the matches, on an evening when his mother was up in town with an impecunious aunt in West Kensington. Mrs. Narracott was sleeping down at her daughter's cottage.

It was only when the lamp was alight and his nerves had quietened down that he decided his imagination had tricked him. Lydia was not the kind of lady to sit in bracken after dusk. Much more likely she would be sitting in a free seat at the first night of a new play before writing her dramatic criticism for the *Week's Survey*.

Brandon settled down to a book of poetry he was reviewing. The expression of his face, beautifully lit and shadowed by an oil lamp at his elbow, would have alarmed the poet. Once or twice he sighed deeply. Then he jerked his head up with a look of real fear. Why had that car stopped outside his cottage gate? Who were those people chattering in the lane?

Probably they had missed their way to the old farmhouse up the next lane, where Mr. Cyril Chantry came down for the simple life, bringing an ample supply of cocktails for all his city friends who swarmed there on a Sunday.

Brandon went stealthily to his window and drew the chintz blind away an inch or two. Yes, there outside his cottage was a big car with blazing headlights, and in the glare of them two men and a woman in evening clothes, laughing and talking. It was Lydia Beaumont's laugh—that low contralto—and her figure, as he could have seen through a fog, tall and willowy, thin-shouldered and a little drooping, like a tired lily.

"I'm lost!" said Brandon behind the window curtain, and he looked for a way of escape, and there was none, because his courage failed him.

Through his windows, open to let in the scent of the flowers, he could hear their words now.

"Well, we shall have to leave you, dear lady. This is the hovel all right, according to the natives. We'll pick you up after the show at Aldershot. Elevenish."

"Better wait until I see whether the man is in," said Lydia.

She put her hands to her mouth and called out his name in a musical chant.

"Bran-don! . . . Bran-don! . . . Frank-y Bran-don!"

Then she addressed his windowpanes in the voice of a Sybil Thorndike.

"Exquisite and chaste soul, open thy doors to a poor lost wench without!"

Brandon blenched behind his window curtains. He was afraid this demonstration in his lane might attract the attention of his neighbours. The Avenels might hear it. And although he had a philosophic mind, he was afraid of public opinion and opened the door.

"Hullo!" he said rather gloomily.

"Hullo, Frank! How beautiful you look by lamplight, framed in those oak beams."

Lydia Beaumont was delighted to see him, and he was a little conscience-stricken because of his lack of enthusiasm. She had been very kind to him. She was a good soul, although a literary critic. They had had many meals together in quiet restaurants. She had pranced him round the Pen and Palette Club. She had taught him all he knew, and more than he wanted to know, about the frailties of the sisterhood in circles outside his social round. They had discussed books together until he almost decided never to write another one because of her intellectual cruelty. He had even been in love with her once. She had kissed him in a taxicab much to his embarrassment, because he was unused to that kind of thing.

She cried out another farewell to the two men with the car.

"Push off, boys. A happy time, and don't forget to fetch me on the way back. *A rivederci, Marco. Auf Wiedersehen, mein lieber Karl.*"

"Elevenish!" shouted one of the men, and the car with the blazing headlights went off like a dragon into the green tunnel of a Surrey lane.

Lydia Beaumont came into the cottage. She wore an evening frock covered by an opera cloak of green silk which presently she threw onto the oak settle by the big hearth place. She laughed into Brandon's eyes—those timid eyes—and rumpled his hair a little, and put out her cheek for him to kiss.

"Hunted down!" she cried. "Tracked to his secret lair. Caught and captured!"

"Sit down, won't you?" he said. "How's London?"

She ignored his invitation to sit down. She examined his cottage sitting room and said "damn" when she knocked her head against one of the low beams, and was exceedingly amused by the big fireplace and a little cupboard in the wall and an oak chest dated 1660, bought in Guildford, and Val Foster's paintings of London scenes, at which she made a grimace, after holding up the lamp to them.

"Horrible!" she exclaimed. "That man ought to be stabbed to death with his own palette knife. Oh, God, that such things should be perpetrated in the sacred name of art! . . . Show me the other rooms, Frank. Where do you sleep? Where's the kitchen? How do you manage for sanitation? Inside or out? Heavens, what courage to live in such primitive conditions! But why crucify yourself like this? Why abandon the little comforts of civilization which humanity has striven and struggled for through many centuries of hard endeavour? Tell me, Frank. What's the idea?"

"It amuses me," he said.

He took her over the other rooms, and she knocked her head against other beams, so that she swore more tragic oaths, but laughed with a kind of unbelief because of the sloping angle of the bedroom floors and the funny little windows with the dimity curtains which Brandon's mother had made for him, and the miniature furniture which was sham antique.

"It's absurd," she said. "It's like a scene in a play by that dreadful man who wrote *Yellow Sands* and other bucolic comedies which pleased the undiscerning multitude. To think that people really did live like this in the time of Queen Elizabeth, and that some of them, even nowadays, go back to these hovels with sentimental make-believe! It's an attempt to escape from the reality of modern life, because of some dream of simplicity. It's an avoidance of sin and motor cars and plumbing and electric light and the subtleties of the modern mind. Poor old Frank! Poor dear misguided man!"

Downstairs again in the sitting room she clutched his arm and said, "What's that?" It happened to be a mouse scratching at a board near the fireplace. A friendly little beggar with whom Brandon was on good terms, having abandoned his mouse traps.

"Quite harmless," he said. "I feed it on crumbs."

Lydia Beaumont pulled her short frock round her thin legs and shuddered.

"I would rather face a man-eating tiger," she told him. "Do you have bugs here as well? Any earwigs, Frank?"

He reassured her. It was the wrong time for earwigs and there were no bugs. The only intruders were daddy-longlegs, and a few poor moths which would burn themselves over his oil lamp. One of them fell with a plop as he spoke, and Lydia shuddered again.

"This country life!" she exclaimed. "How I hate to be reminded of nature. The whole art of life is to thrust nature back and forget its horrors and indecencies."

But one penalty of nature, not to be avoided even in the town, asserted itself after she had talked for some time about the latest incidents at the Pen and Palette Club—that girl, Vera Winch, the red-headed thing who did fashion drawings for *Modes and Manners*, had gone off with poor Hargreaves, a married man with four children.

"My dear," she said, "I feel strangely hollow. What about a crust of bread and a hunk of cheese? Isn't that the sort of thing you eat in Surrey? And what about a little hot drink? Isn't there some stuff called cocoa which you brew in these parts?"

He made some tea for her and produced a cold ham and a new loaf, and some admirable currant buns made that morning by Mrs. Narracott.

She was comforted. She was grateful also when he fetched in some logs and made a fire in the big chimney place, where she sat close in his settle with her frock tucked over her knees, smoking Gold Flake cigarettes in a very long holder, with her head against her green silk cloak. Brandon, sitting with his pipe in his mouth on a straight-backed chair on the other side of his fireplace, glanced at her now and then with a kind of amused anxiety. There was still a long time to go before those men would take her away. He hoped to goodness they wouldn't come in and expect whisky and stay talking. She closed her eyes now and then against the firelight, and he studied her face, very pale except for the artificial redness of her lips, strained and nervy, because of first nights, late hours, and the wear and tear of a writing life in London, but not without a waxen beauty, like a hothouse flower. He liked the droop of her thin hand over the arm of the settle, and the line of her thin neck as she held her head back against that green cloak, and the long green earrings which caught the firelight now and then. Orpen could have painted a good thing of her like that. Portrait of an Intellectual Lady.

She was so utterly different from that girl Audrey Avenel and from these Surrey ladies—the colonels' wives, or that masculine-looking doctor up the lane who dug up her garden in white shorts. Highbrow, they would call her in Harley Green—one of the little clique of critics and minor poets and journalists who had constituted themselves the judges of art and literature in reviews with small circulations, with a contempt for all that pleased the half-educated mind, and even for any work that appealed to a mind outside their own small set. If any book they praised became a popular success they felt conscience-stricken and uneasy. Could it be possible that they had made an error in judgment? Could they have seen quality in a book that was read by suburban women and city clerks and girl typists? *The Constant Nymph*, for instance—amazing! It had become a best seller. . . .

"Tell me, Frank," said Lydia Beaumont, "what are you writing now?"

He gave her the vague outline of his latest plot, which was bothering him a good deal.

It seemed to her good, though perhaps rather too broad in its scope. She liked miniature painting, every stroke laid on with a fine brush, as it were—a ruthless economy of words—the spirit showing through bare bones—the little white flame unobscured by detail.

"Your last novel was a gem, my dear."

"It sold six hundred copies," said Brandon.

"Excellent! You appeal to those who understand. Much more than that is getting very near the mass mind."

"It didn't pay for my cigarettes," said Brandon. "Without my journalistic work——"

"Exactly!" she exclaimed. "That's how books ought to be written. Not for the money they bring in. Not for financial success. As a by-product—or rather as the guarded flame in that sanctuary which only those may enter who are given the secret key. Our livelihood must be earned in other ways, by journalistic stuff for as many guineas as we can grab, by serving in tea shops, if necessary, by selling some part of our soul in the market place for a market price."

She enlarged on this theory rather brilliantly for three quarters of an hour, during which time Brandon smoked two pipes. It was a quarter to eleven, as he knew by the clock in the hall, which struck melodiously. In another quarter of an hour those two men would be back.

She returned to a discussion of his own work.

"You have one very great fault, Frank. I've told you so before, and I'm telling you again."

"Go ahead!" said Brandon, interested again because it was his work that was in question. Like all authors, he had his vanity, or, at least, a very deep interest in the stuff of his brain.

"You are not cruel enough. You must be more ruthless. All good work cuts like a knife, to the bone, with the surgeon's touch. I'm afraid you'll kill yourself by kindness. You hate to hurt people's feelings. You're too gentle. Treat 'em rough, my dear. Stab life to its vitals. Tear out its guts, darling."

"I believe in sympathy," said Brandon. "I try to understand. I don't blame anybody. *Tout savoir*, and all the rest of it."

“Weak!” said Lydia. “We writers are the critics of life. We mustn’t be satisfied with anything. We must steel ourselves against pity. We must be scathing, remorseless, cynical, brutal, indecent. And talking about indecency, darling, that’s another little quarrel I have with you. You’re too damnably decent! You keep your characters swathed up like Early Victorian misses in long drawers and petticoats. Strip them. Show them naked. Expose human nature to the skin without camouflage.”

“I’m old-fashioned,” said Brandon. “I believe in reticence. Sex stuff is not in my line, anyhow.”

Lydia was amused and annoyed. She gave her beautiful contralto laugh.

“Reticence!” she cried. “The worst crime—the incurable disease of the English mind. How can great literature be written with reticence? Is truth reticent? Is life reticent? ‘Sex stuff is not in his line,’ says the child. Then life is not in his line. Then he has no business to write novels. Then he ought to go into the Church and take tea with old ladies in back parlours. Perhaps that is why he has come to live in Surrey—to hide himself away from life, to escape the lure of sex, to avoid truth, to turn his eyes away from that great indecent reality which is human nature.”

“You liked my last novel,” said Brandon. “You said that every word was a jewel and every thought a flower.”

Lydia Beaumont’s waxlike complexion flushed slightly, and her long eyelashes fluttered.

“Did I say that? It must have been after a late night at the Pen and Palette Club. I did like it, my dear. As a bit of miniature, chaste and satisfying. But I detected your fatal weakness. It was too kind. It was too decent. I want you to liberate yourself from your inhibitions. Because I believe in you I want you to forget the little lessons you learnt at your mother’s knee and to write the stuff of the subconscious mind, primitive, Freudian, free.”

Eleven o’clock struck in the hall.

Brandon listened anxiously for an approaching car. There was no sound outside but the wind in the trees and an owl hooting.

“I don’t hear your men,” he remarked.

“Oh, they’ll be here. It’s that show at Aldershot.”

She continued her conversation and her good advice. She smoked five more cigarettes. Brandon put some more logs on the fire. She developed the thesis that in order to write a good novel a man or a woman ought to break clean away from all moral conventions. Novelists ought to be outside the

moral law and recognized as such by society—licensed libertines—as part of their necessary education in the varieties of human experience.

Twelve o'clock struck by the clock in the hall.

Brandon was getting anxious. Indeed, by this time he was on tenterhooks and a victim of gloomy apprehensions. What on earth had happened to those fellows with the car? Why in the name of heaven didn't they come? Supposing they had had a breakdown? Supposing they were dead in a ditch? It would be frightful and appalling if Lydia had to spend the night with him. Mrs. Narracott would turn up at half-past seven. It would be all over the village.

"I could do with a drink," said Lydia, "and I'm smoking myself to death."

He had, by great luck, a little whisky left at the bottom of a bottle. Lydia shared it with him in hot water, which he boiled on his log fire after some careful work with the bellows. She chid him again for abandoning town for this rusticity.

"It's bad for you, darling," she told him. "You ought to keep in touch with the intelligentsia. You must feed your critics now and then. Otherwise they forget. Otherwise they will come to regard you as an outsider. And you must thrill to the rhythm of modern life—the beat and surge of the great city. Otherwise you'll get out of tune. You will be like one crying in the wilderness with none to hear. . . . Heavens, how sleepy I am! What can have happened to those foolish men?"

They discussed the latest book by Aldous Huxley, the new play by Noel Coward—Brandon hadn't seen it—the weekly dogmatism of Arnold Bennett, a letter by Bernard Shaw on the subject of speed limit, the symbolism of Epstein on St. James's Park Station ("clean above the heads of the mob," said Lydia), and other topics of intellectual interest. Brandon was on the rack. His ears strained to the lane outside. Several times he had the hallucination that he heard a car and went to the door to open it, causing Lydia to shiver with the gusts that came in.

It was one o'clock.

"Probably drunk and possibly dead," said Lydia. "Serve them right for luring me out to this abandoned countryside. I'm going to bed. How about a pair of pajamas, or shall I sleep in my undies?"

"Really," said Brandon, "I think we ought to wait up another hour. What will my housekeeper say when she comes in the morning?"

Lydia gave her contralto laugh.

“She won’t say anything, but she’ll think deeply and disgustingly. I’m going to bed.”

“Stick it out for another half hour!” pleaded Brandon. “Supposing those fellows turn up when you’re in bed?”

“For goodness sake, don’t let them wake me up,” said Lydia. “Where’s a candle, darling?”

He provided her with a candle which blew out in his mother’s bedroom. He could not find the matches for some time and had to fumble for them. Lydia hit her head on a low beam and swore again and then laughed with her usual sense of humour.

“This is terribly comic!” she cried. “Your anxious face, Frank—it’s a picture of moral apprehension. Don’t be afraid, little one.”

She went to bed. Brandon passed a restless night on the other side of an oak door which creaked when the wind came down the chimney stack, startling him out of fitful snatches of sleep. At six o’clock in the morning there was a loud hoot of a motor horn in the lane, and descending in his pajamas and a Burberry coat, Brandon let in two dishevelled young men in evening clothes with crumpled shirt fronts. They were highly amused with themselves and explained that they had run out of petrol somewhere south of the Hog’s Back and had slept very comfortably in the car until a friendly fellow in a lorry taking milk to London had provided them with a tin of juice. They were even more amused when Brandon said they ought to be ashamed of themselves and that they had placed him in a very embarrassing position.

“What a story for the Pen and Palette Club!” laughed Mark Ambrose whom Brandon knew as a critic of extended influence, writing reviews of novels for no less than three important papers, so that he could blast a reputation or make one every Thursday morning.

“What a chance for a *Punch* drawing!” exclaimed Charles Arkwright, the artist. “A well known lady of fashion spends the night in a country cottage after a motor mishap. View of lady under old beams with spiders’ webs. View of country mouse astonished by the taste of her lipstick. Ghost of ancient yokel gazing astonished at said lady sleeping under his ancient rooftree. ‘Can that be Maria?’ he asks. . . . By the way, Brandon, I suppose it’s possible to produce bacon and eggs in this rustic retreat? I heard a cock crowing before we were rescued. Where there’s a cock there must be a hen. Where there’s a hen there must be eggs. Pigs probably abound hereabouts.”

It was very vexatious, but Brandon had to provide them with breakfast. Lydia came down in his pajamas, having slept she said like a child of Mary. There was vivacious conversation and considerable cigarette smoke before Mrs. Narracott arrived from the village at half-past seven. Even Brandon smiled at the stupefaction with which she beheld the scene.

"Well, I never!" she gasped with her hand to her bosom. "It made my heart jump into my mouth when I heard voices."

Lydia departed with her friends and a wave of the hand.

"Good-bye, my dear. A thousand thanks. We had a wonderful conversation last night. Do come back to civilization and the lights of London. We miss you, Frank. Remember what I told you. Cruelty. Brutality. Ruthlessness! You're too kind!"

She kissed her hand to him.

The car screeched and leaped ahead into the leafy lane.

Francis Brandon, novelist, stood alone in his sitting room holding a warm pipe in the pocket of his Burberry. It had been a terrible invasion of his sanctuary. He laughed to himself uneasily. It might happen again.

13

THAT girl Audrey Avenel became very comradely and broke down his habitual shyness by her frankness and simplicity. There was nothing in it, as far as he was concerned, beyond a kind of brotherly feeling for a pretty girl twelve years younger than himself, and it was good for him to be pulled out of his loneliness sometimes. It was good for him as a novelist. Women were his weak point. He just didn't know them—how they talked and what they thought—especially girls of a younger generation than himself and brought up in the country.

The lack of feminine interest in his early novels was partly the cause of their failure to obtain a wide sale. He left out the love interest, as the publishers call it—shirked it shamefully, as he shirked it in life—and the ladies in West Kensington and other places where fiction is most read—at the rate of a novel a day—decided that he was a very dull writer who could not give them any of that sense of vicarious romance by which they obtained a little warmth and colour in the drabness of their daily lives. Audrey Avenel, I think, comes under various guises in his latter books as a type of

the modern girl, although he was unconscious of drawing her portrait deliberately—always rather boyish and free-spoken and comradely as she was with him. She interrupted his work—very pleasantly, as he had to admit—by recruiting him for haymaking in one of her father's meadows, and jeered at him for working in his braces and for his awkwardness with a pitchfork, and then lay down on a hay-stook while he sat and smoked a pipe by her side as the reward of honest sweat.

"Don't you feel the need of love sometimes?" she asked him on this particular day of haymaking.

He was cautious on that subject.

"It's a luxury I can't afford," he said, smiling at her over the bowl of his pipe. "I don't let it nag at me."

"But surely," she said, leaning up on one elbow, "you must feel sometimes that life without love is rather empty and barren? Besides, there is such a thing as passion."

"There certainly is," said Brandon. "I expect it interferes with one's work a good deal."

"It must be rather pleasant," said Audrey thoughtfully. "It's a natural instinct. It's the real purpose of life, after all. If one misses that one misses everything."

"Oh, there are lots of other things," said Brandon. "Comradeship. Interest in ideas. Beauty. Trees. Birds. Sympathy. Knowledge."

Audrey Avenel thought those were all rather chilly.

"You leave out the motive of all those things and what they lead to," she said. "Comradeship stops just short of love. Beauty doesn't mean anything unless it's coloured by love. Love is sympathy intensified. Knowledge doesn't go very far unless one has had the experience of marriage and babies and all that sort of thing. Don't you think so?"

Brandon was rather staggered by this and glanced at that girl lying on the haycock with her face to the sun.

"You must have been reading those disturbing novels again," he said.

She denied that. She said that she was just speaking what was in her own mind quite simply.

"The worst of it is," she said, "that I'm quite likely to miss the real thing in life—as it seems to me. There are no decent men about here, except old fogies and a boy or two, like Dick, and week-enders who bring their wives down to thatched cottages on Friday afternoons, for intensive gardening and

picnic meals. I think I shall have to go in search of life one day, like Sylvia, much as I hate to hurt poor old Daddy."

Brandon noticed that in her enumeration of male creatures thereabouts she had not included him.

"Let's go and have a look at life now and then," he suggested. "It's rather revolting in the Pimlico Road. Even worse in Oxford Circus. You may be glad to get back to Harley Green."

He took her now and then to a matinée in town—she drove him beyond the speed limit in a baby car which they parked in St. James's Square—and they waited in the queue outside the pit entrance, unless he had had another short story accepted, when he stood her an upper-circle in great style. Once he offered her stalls and a lunch at an expensive little restaurant in Soho—that was when he had had an unexpected forty pounds for a story in America—but she would not allow such extravagance as all that.

"I'm not going to sponge on you beyond a moderate limit," she told him with her usual frankness. "If you won't let me pay for lunch—out of my own pocket money—we shall have to do things on the cheap. And it's much better fun, really."

Over the luncheon tables of cheap restaurants she talked very freely about her family life.

Sylvia was asking for trouble. She was threatening to take a job in a scent shop in Bond Street kept by a Russian refugee. Her father thought it disgraceful and very dangerous. He thought she would be ogled by Bond Street loungers and disreputable scoundrels of all kinds. In any case, she would be taking the bread out of the mouth of some poor working girl who had a real need to earn her livelihood. He utterly forbade her to think of such a thing. But she was thinking of it. She had practically accepted.

Meanwhile Sylvia was having a flirtation with a young man who kept a garage in Knightsbridge—she had met him when she was working in the hat shop—who drove out after dinner to Harley Heath and met her by the old sand pit. Last night she had crept in through the bedroom window and was very nearly caught by her father, who thought it was a burglar and came into their bedroom to ask whether they had heard anything. Sylvia had slipped into bed with all her clothes on, just in time, after his rap at the door. The little wretch pretended to wake up with a start, and rebuked her father for spoiling her beauty sleep!

"Needless to say, I didn't give her away," said Audrey, "but I'm getting anxious about her. I don't think that garage man is quite nice, somehow."

“I should think it’s highly probable he is quite unpleasant,” said Brandon, not giving away the fact that he had met Sylvia on the heath that night. “Don’t you think you ought to whisper a word to that charming mother of yours?”

Audrey was horrified at the idea.

“Good heavens, no! Mother is the last person to understand.”

“Understand what?” asked Brandon curiously.

“The need of liberty,” said Audrey. “The right of any girl to work out her own fate. It’s up to Sylvia to take care of herself, and if she doesn’t she’ll have to take the consequences.”

“They might be tragic,” suggested Brandon.

Audrey shrugged her shoulders.

“One can’t be sheltered from everything. Besides, I don’t suppose there’s anything in it. A little experience, and why not? Personally I can’t blame Sylvia very much, although I wouldn’t behave like a servant maid flirting with a butcher boy in a dark lane. It’s the effect of too much suppression at home.”

“Why doesn’t she ask the fellow home?” asked Brandon.

Audrey laughed and admitted that Sylvia had asked him home. It hadn’t been a success. Her father had been very rude to the young man and thought he was a cad of the worst type. He utterly declined to have him in the house again. Hence those meetings on Harley Heath.

“It’s rather dangerous,” said Brandon, who had old-fashioned ideas and the timidity of a shy man regarding this kind of thing.

“Well,” said Audrey, “it’s all Father’s fault. After all, we live in the twentieth century. The modern girl can’t be kept in purdah.”

Her bright eyes gazed round the restaurant, which was on the Chelsea side of Sloane Square.

“There’s a humorous-looking man trying to attract your attention,” she remarked. “He looks like the second officer of a tramp steamer in one of Conrad’s stories, just home from the China station.”

“He’s a painter,” said Brandon. “By name of Val Foster. And he’s going to interrupt our conversation about the morals of maidens in Surrey.”

The humorous-looking man had left his own little table, where he was lunching with a lady with scarlet lips and a long cigarette holder. He stood in front of Brandon and made the sign of the cross over him.

"May the Lord have mercy on you!" he said. "So you've come back to these haunts of vice from that rat-haunted cottage. At last you are lured back to civilization from the wilds of the Hog's Back and the wealds of Wonersh. And I see you have brought a wood nymph with you."

"Miss Audrey Avenel," said Brandon rather stiffly.

"She looks like it," said Val Foster. "The name smells of violets and woodbine and the lesser loosestrife. It breathes the air of Surrey heaths. It hath an old-English rhythm, like a ballad by Herrick. How-do-you-do, Miss Avenel? May I take a cup of coffee with you? This man Brandon and I are ancient comrades in arms. Once—a thousand years ago—I saved his life in the front-line trenches, and several times I have tried to save his soul from the greater dangers of his own self-torture. I myself am a pavement artist, begging the charity of the passer-by."

Brandon laughed, and coloured up a little at this rhodomontade in a London restaurant, which had attracted the attention of neighbouring tables, where people smiled over their menu cards.

"Sit down," he said, "and don't talk hot air so that all the world can hear it."

That afternoon he took Audrey to Val Foster's studio, and she was amused at this glimpse of life in the neighbourhood of the King's Road—where Foster's bed in a curtained alcove was still unmade, and where he produced several cups of weak tea by the aid of a Tommy's Cooker. He sent Brandon out to buy a loaf of bread and some penny buns at the baker's shop round the corner, and when Brandon came back Audrey seemed to be getting on very well with her new acquaintance, judging by her gusts of laughter.

"Audrey is going to let me paint her portrait one day," said Foster, and Brandon was slightly annoyed at this use of her Christian name.

"I shall paint her," said Foster, "walking through a field of waving corn, bronzed before the harvest. She will wear a muslin frock sprigged with rosebuds, and she will carry her hat in one hand and possibly a sheaf of corn or some mangel-wurzels in the other. I believe it will add to my reputation. I may even be able to give up my pitch outside Harrod's."

Audrey examined some of his paintings with interest and stood in front of two nudes with unabashed eyes.

"Rather nice," she said. "But why do you paint them green?"

"I saw them green," he answered.

She thought there must be something wrong with his eyes, but he assured her that he saw with his soul and not with his eyes.

"I have a green soul," he said. "Like a little leaf in spring."

"Do your models stand for you like that?" she asked. "Not a stitch on?"

He admitted that they did and thought nothing of it. They were born to the business and very respectable girls.

"Do you think nothing of it?" she asked again turning her frank eyes to him.

"Not a thing," he assured her, with a shrug of the shoulders. "Why should I? Why should anyone?"

She wasn't quite sure. She knew that she would feel shy if she stood to him with nothing on. Probably it was a matter of convention. Didn't modesty come in at all?

"Only with those who have been taught to be ashamed of their bodies in our ridiculous English way," said Val Foster.

"It's all very queer," said Audrey. "My mother is shocked if I show too much leg in a perfectly good stocking."

She discussed this question without self-consciousness, without any of that shyness which suddenly afflicted Brandon, who had been born ten years earlier. These modern girls and boys were rather amazing like that, he thought, and rather splendid, but he was abashed by her next question, asked with apparent simplicity.

"What's the difference between one of your nudes and an indecent photograph?"

Even Val Foster was shocked at that remark.

"My dear child, my sweet Audrey, you alarm me. This is Art! Or if it isn't it ought to be. Art with an enormous capital A. Not the picture of one female, but the embodiment of all female form."

"Well, all I can say is that I've never seen a green body."

"We must talk of this at length," said Foster. "I must explain to you my views on Art. It distresses me that a young woman from Surrey should be so grossly ignorant of the finer sensibilities."

When they left the studio Audrey resumed her seat at the wheel of her small car, and Brandon climbed in with his long legs.

"What next?" asked Audrey.

“Home to Harley Heath,” said Brandon. “Just in time for your dinner and my supper.”

“It seems a pity,” said Audrey. “Why not see some more oddities? Why not have dinner at some amusing place and then do a theatre? That new piece by Noel Coward?”

Brandon decided otherwise. He had his work to do, he explained. Also he felt a sense of responsibility for her safe return at a reasonable hour. There was another reason which he left unsaid. He had no more than four shillings and a few coppers in his trousers pocket.

“Back to the walled garden!” said Audrey. “Just when I feel inclined for adventure. I was rather hoping I might induce you to take me to a haunt of vice full of dope fiends and desperadoes. Why not explore the underworld a bit? The East End?”

“It’s a most respectable place,” explained Brandon. “Harley Green is gay and frivolous compared with life in the Commercial Road. They work harder east of Aldgate.”

“Well, come and have dinner with one of my aunts,” suggested Audrey as the next best thing, and one way of postponing a return to rural life. “She lives in Brompton Square, with a French maid, and is terribly eccentric. You might put her into a novel.”

Brandon was sorry to disappoint her, but he had the end of a chapter in his mind and wanted to get it down into words. His work came first. His imaginary world lured him back to Surrey and a quiet room with a pipe, and the rattle of a typewriter undisturbed.

Reluctantly Audrey Avenel headed her car in the direction of Putney Bridge and the Portsmouth Road.

“I mustn’t be greedy,” she said. “You’ve given me a very good time and wasted a lot of your own. Does Mr. Foster always talk like that, or does he ever become serious when he’s alone with himself?”

“He’s a melancholy bird, really,” said Brandon, “but he wears the jester’s mask. It’s not a bad mask for poverty-stricken artists and unsuccessful novelists. I’ve never learnt to wear it.”

“He was wonderfully amusing,” said Audrey. “One doesn’t meet that type round Harley Green.”

She laughed over the wheel of her little car and then raced homewards, passing cars five times as big, and ignoring a policeman’s arm in Kingston, and getting hauled up by that controller of traffic, whose severity softened under the influence of her innocent smile and pretty face.

"Now do be careful, missy!" he pleaded.

Brandon was deposited safely outside the gate of his cottage just before lighting-up time.

"Good going!" he said. "But many hairbreadth escapes for an elderly man with weak nerves."

"Not so elderly as all that!" she remarked with a laughing glance at him.

"Thanks enormously," she added, and then, to his surprise, held her face towards him with an unmistakable invitation.

"That's very sweet of you," he said, and kissed her lightly—a brother's kiss.

She waved her hand and tucked herself into her two-seater and departed from him.

For a moment or two he stood outside his cottage door thoughtfully, and self-conscious, not quite sure whether he ought to have accepted that invitation. Her mother regarded him as a safe companion for her daughter. She would trust Audrey with him anywhere, she once told him. Well, he was, perfectly safe. She looked upon him as a confirmed bachelor, a kind of adopted uncle, a man belonging to an elder generation, twelve years her senior. No harm whatever. Not the slightest danger, and a very pleasant comradeship, though rather an interruption to his writing now and then.

He gave an account of his day's doings to his mother—omitting that kiss which had brought them to an agreeable end. Then he went into his room and shut the door and read the unfinished sentence above the ribbon of his typewriter. That last chapter wasn't bad, he thought. This novel he was writing was the best thing he had done, though that wasn't saying much. Sometimes he thought it was good.

It was the story of an East End doctor like his father, but a youngish man, who drudges in a poor practice and devotes himself to people living on the dole, and old charwomen, and the inhabitants of workmen's dwellings and overcrowded houses. He is surrounded by the sordid ugliness of mean streets and mean lives, and his imagination is starved of beauty for which he secretly craves as a man who should have been an artist or a poet rather than a medical practitioner on the "panel." Always he cherishes the dream that one day he may escape from squalor for a time and go roving in places of which he reads at night after his hard day's work—Amalfi and Sorrento, the Greek islands, Morocco, the Egyptian desert, Athens. He gets no farther than Epping Forest now and then.

The chance comes to him when a girl who has been slumming in his district—attached to some Anglo-Catholic settlement—falls in love with him. She has more money than she knows what to do with, and when she visits him beauty comes with her. She asks him to marry her, seeing that he will never confess his love for a rich woman. He is tempted by every instinct in his nature, except devotion to the people whom he has served in the slums. She schemes out their honeymoon—Italy, the Mediterranean, Constantinople.

Then suddenly he is blackmailed by a man whom he has taken into his house and helped out of the gutter—once a medical student and now a weakling and degenerate. The doctor turns him out of the house but is arrested on false evidence for performing an illegal operation on a girl brought to him by this scoundrel. The case is not strong enough to convince a jury, although the judge sums up against him. He is acquitted, but the girl he was going to marry breaks off her engagement because of the public scandal, and a dreadful doubt in her own mind, and a weakness in her loyalty. So he goes back to his drudgery, suspected by some of the people he has served, and hooted on the street by young hooligans.

That incident of the arrest was perhaps suggestive of melodrama, though it had happened to his father's predecessor, who had committed suicide. Lydia Beaumont would criticize it as having too much plot and inclining to the sentimental. But he was getting some real stuff into it, character studies of cockney types, the atmosphere of East End life, the human comedy of a doctor's practice, and the mind of the doctor himself, with that dream of beauty for which he goes seeking in Epping Forest and Battersea Park, or on the tops of buses with a sunset over the chimney pots. There was something of Brandon himself in it, as an author must always put something of himself into any work that has the quality of truth. He too had been haunted by that dream of beauty which now he had found in this old cottage beyond the outposts of suburbia.

14

It was at the Avenels' house that Brandon met two of his neighbours, and Audrey gave him a slight sketch of them beforehand when he went round to dinner one evening. He went alone because his mother had a touch of bronchitis and asked him to go without her.

“Prepare for something quite beautiful,” said Audrey when she found him waiting in the drawing room in his shabby dinner jacket and a pair of trousers which he had pressed under his mattress the previous night.

“A good sunset?” he asked, glancing through the window at the sky above the garden, into which a purple twilight was creeping.

“More human and alluring,” she told him, after a laugh at that guess. “Pearl Jerningham is coming with her disreputable father.”

Brandon could not place them, and was sorry they were coming.

“When Pearl appears, men wilt,” said Audrey. “Even Father brightens up and tells his best stories. Sylvia and I haven’t a look-in.”

Brandon was alarmed and glanced towards the door as though deciding on a way of escape.

“Do you think I need stay?” he asked. “I shirk meeting distinguished neighbours.”

Audrey caught hold of his sleeve, as though preventing his retreat.

“You’ll like meeting Pearl,” she told him. “I must say she’s a darling, though very dangerous as a rival with any male creature who might otherwise be attracted by my rustic beauty. Her father is Geoffrey Jerningham, the youngest son of that old woman who lives in the Georgian house behind the green. He has the reputation of a rake, though he seems quite harmless. It runs in the family, I’m told. The reckless Jerninghams. You may have heard of them.”

“There was a cavalier of that name,” said Brandon, searching his memory. “He helped to pawn the crown jewels when Charles was in exile.”

“There’s nothing you don’t know!” cried Audrey, astounded by this scholarship.

She said that the present Mr. Jerningham continued the family tradition. He had sold his overmortgaged house at Haldish to pay old debts, and it was now a private hotel with jazz dances on Saturday nights for parties from the Hog’s Back and neighbourhood.

“Now he tries to make a living at Monte Carlo and other gambling resorts, where poor old Pearl has a trying time with him in cheap hotels. When they’re not abroad they live with the old lady.”

She volunteered another item of information.

“Pearl is scanning the horizon for a rich husband who will give her a good time and keep her impecunious Pa. She makes no secret of it.”

"Well, I'm safe, anyhow," said Brandon, looking at the frayed cuff of his dinner jacket. "No pretty lady will get a good time from me."

Audrey laughed at him, and her eyes glinted behind a flutter of lashes.

"Hermit! How about love in a cottage?"

"I'm only part owner," he reminded her. "I can only offer half a roof."

"Half a roof is better than no bed," said Audrey, with one of those audacities of direct statement which alarmed him.

She smiled mischievously at his look of consternation and then put a finger to her lips at the sound of voices in the hall.

It was her father bringing in his guests.

"My dear Pearl," he said, with old-fashioned courtesy, "what a charming frock that is, if you will allow me to say so."

"I'm glad you think so," said a laughing voice. "I faked it up in the back bedroom of a cheap hotel while Father sneaked off nightly to Monte Carlo by tram from Mentone. It bears the hallmark of home made."

"Pearl would look pretty in any old thing, or in nothing at all," said a tall, handsome, middle-aged man with a tanned face, clean-shaven except for a slight touch of side whiskers, and dark, humorous eyes, puffed beneath their lids. "You should see her in her bathing kit, and not much of it, on the Côte d'Azur. That's when the elderly exiles gather round, and poor old Father begins to get anxious."

"Wait till after dinner, Father," said the lady. "It's too early in the evening to be really bright."

"Not at all, my dear. It's never too early to pay a compliment to a pretty woman, even if she happens to be one's own daughter."

Brandon had retired into the background, feeling ill at ease. He would not have come if he had known that the Avenels expected guests—not even for the look of a lady who was certainly attractive. She had bronze-coloured hair with a glint of gold in it as it caught the evening sun through the leaded panes of this old room, and roguish eyes which were as darkly blue as one of his delphiniums, and a slender, graceful little figure with bare arms which seemed to him beautifully modelled. She was older than Audrey—perhaps turned thirty, he thought—and a different type, more elegant, more sophisticated, more alluring in an indefinable way. This old room with its panelled walls and casement windows, and portraits of eighteenth-century men and women suited her type. She belonged to a room like this. She reminded him a little of Emma Hamilton in a portrait by Romney, before she

became plump. She had a family likeness to that tall, good-looking lad—her brother, of course—whom he had met on the Avenels' tennis court—that supercilious young man who had taken him for the piano tuner.

"Hullo, Pearl!" cried Audrey. "How's the naughty world beyond Harley Green? Monte Carlo and the twinkling lights of Nice?"

"Still naughty and still twinkling. No fun if one stays there on the cheap."

"Oh, I would go there barefoot if I could go," said Audrey. "No such luck."

They kissed each other and laughed, still clasping hands for a moment.

"How's Sylvia?" asked the pretty lady. "Still making hats in Knightsbridge?"

"No, she has finished with that. A feline old woman there made life unbearable. Even liberty and the larger life have to be paid for, it seems!"

Colonel Avenel looked around for Brandon and discovered him in the shadow of the window seat.

"A new neighbour of ours," he said with a friendly gesture. "Mr. Brandon, the novelist. Brandon, my dear fellow, let me introduce you to a charming lady, Miss Jerningham. And her distinguished and gallant father, Mr. Geoffrey Jerningham. His ancestors and mine fought on many a foreign field together."

"And committed innumerable atrocities together, I have no doubt, and laid siege to many frail hearts together, and got gloriously drunk together under this old rooftree," said Mr. Jerningham with genial irony. "Now their descendants are 'broke' together, but Dick Avenel is not so 'broke' as G. J. He hasn't had to sell up the old home yet, in spite of death duties and income tax."

He held Brandon's hand in a strong grip, gave him a searching look which summed up his shabbiness, and then turned to talk to Colonel Avenel again.

"I've heard of you from Val Foster," said Miss Jerningham whom Audrey called "Pearl." "He thinks a lot of you as an idealist."

When she took his hand she looked at him with an amused interest, as though she had heard good stories about him.

Brandon was staggered. It seemed extremely unlikely that this elegant girl should know his whimsical and poverty-stricken friend.

"How on earth did you meet that humorist?" he asked, and Audrey seconded his question with an amazed laughter.

"Pearl! Surely you don't know Mr. Foster with the funny face? My Mr. Foster who is going to paint me in a cornfield?"

"Certainly," said Pearl Jerningham. "We met—'twas in a crowd. As a matter of fact we stayed at the same *pension* together in Mentone, but he was getting his room cheap for painting a portrait of the manager's wife and making her look beautiful. He saved me from dying of boredom at the hands of old ladies from West Kensington. I tramped with him into Italian-speaking villages—Dolce Acqua, St. Agnes, Castellar—and wore out my thin shoes struggling up high crags with him, and sat with him while he painted hilltop hamlets in strange, unnatural colours. He made me laugh immoderately, and he swore that he loved me with a fierce and brutal passion which was only restrained by the thought of his widowed mother."

Audrey slapped her hand and pretended to look vexed for a moment.

"You are a vixen, Pearl! You steal my very latest friends. I've no chance when you come within a thousand miles."

"Pooh!" said Pearl Jerningham. "Men make love to me a little and marry the other girl. I scare them. There's something about me which makes them cautious."

"I'm not surprised, Pearl," said Sylvia, who had just come into the room. "You're very costly looking, you know."

"Sharp-tongued Sylvia!" cried Pearl Jerningham. "So you've abandoned that hat shop, I hear. What's the next way of escape?"

Sylvia put her finger to her lips and glanced at her father.

"Hush! The forbidden subject."

She gave her hand to Brandon, and there was a shy look in her eyes for a moment. It was the first time she had seen him since that night walk on the heath, after meeting a young man who kept a garage in Knightsbridge.

Young Avenel appeared, extremely good-looking, perfectly self-possessed, tall and elegant in his dinner jacket with well creased trousers.

"Hullo, Dick!" said Miss Jerningham with smiling surprise. "What a Beau Brummel you're becoming! Last time we met you were in the hobbledehoy stage."

"Time flies," said Dick. "I'm getting an old man. My last term at Winchester."

"And then what? Oxford? The army?"

"The Air Force," he told her, and shot a smiling glance at his mother, over whose hand Mr. Jerningham was bending with an air of devotion.

"If the mater doesn't cut up rough," he added in a lowered voice. "She registers objection at the moment. Safety first and that kind of thing. Absurd, don't you think?"

She did think so.

"No safety first for me," she said. "But then I'm a Jerningham. We have the gambling instinct."

A middle-aged man in a suit of black, getting shabby, like other things in this old house, entered the room and made an announcement in a sad voice.

"Dinner is served."

Brandon sat between Mrs. Avenel and Miss Jerningham, whom the others called Pearl. He liked the picture of this room, with lighted candles on a dining table of polished oak, though there was still a glow in the sky outside, and the blinds were not drawn, and he could see beyond the lawns and flower beds the faint far-off line of the Sussex downs under a streak of crimson. The people at this table were not of his caste and type. They were unlike his friends in Maida Vale and Chelsea, or his shabby-genteel aunts and cousins—his mother's people in London suburbs. They belonged to old houses like this, with panelled walls and old gardens. They had behind them the long tradition of country life when their families had made the history of England, and when they had been rich and secure and privileged. They belonged to the old "quality" of England.

These girls, Audrey and Sylvia, had that tradition behind them, though they revolted against it. They were different, somehow, from the girls who queued up for the pit outside London theatres or tapped typewriters in city offices—his crowd, really. They still had a touch of this country life about them—a certain simplicity of manner, an inherited look of sheltered life, hard to define. That boy Dick, with his faint, ironic smile and easy manners and slightly arrogant look, had a distinction which came from centuries of breeding in homes like this, sheltered from the squalor and drudgery of life. His father over there, utterly ignorant of literature and art, with all his instincts rooted in tradition, was like some of those brigadiers he had met in the war, gallant, without nerves, narrow-minded, but with a code of honour and of courage that was inflexible. That man Jerningham, who looked a bit of a blackguard, had a touch of quality and character not produced by modern democracy or the prosperous middle-classes. His lean face and sunken eyes, puffed under the lids, and his bushy black eyebrows, belonged to the Stuart period, like one of the rakes and gamblers of the Restoration,

like his own ancestor who had worn ragged ruffles with Charles in exile. His daughter—Pearl, they called her—was one of the flowers of this old-English breed and in her way exquisite, he thought.

"This house and these people," thought Brandon, "belong to the past, really. This is one of their last sanctuaries. The bungalows and the little red-roofed villas are creeping close to them. Their fields are being sold as building plots. Democracy is pushing them out of their old ways of life . . . and they know it, and see their doom ahead."

Brandon was listening to Geoffrey Jerningham, who was dominating the conversation at the dinner table.

"I can't say the Riviera is a cheerful spot these days, although one meets so many old pals out there. Refugees, I call them. All trying to escape the income tax by living six months abroad, all investing their capital in foreign countries because they're so devilish afraid of socialism in our time—well, it's here all right!—and all bored to death with themselves because they're cut off from their roots and living in exile. If it weren't that I like a little flutter at Monte now and then—by the way, I've worked out a pretty good system!—I wouldn't go near that particular crowd. They're too devilish depressing. We all know the game is up in England as far as we're concerned, but one doesn't want to be talking about it all the time."

Colonel Avenel laughed rather uneasily.

"I'm afraid I talk about it a good deal. After all, one doesn't want to see England go downhill without an effort to save the old country, or at least without a protest now and then."

Geoffrey Jerningham raised his wineglass and looked at the colour of his claret and sighed.

"My dear old lad, what's the use of protesting? If you were one of those damned politicians you might get a hearing, but our class is ruled out nowadays. What can any of us do when the country is in the hands of men who bid against each other to bribe the electorate, and when those who have a bit of money or the luck to earn it must provide for those who have nothing and won't work?"

Colonel Avenel groaned.

"I'm not thinking of my own money so much as I am of the demoralization and ruin of the country. There are young fellows about here who live on the dole, marry on the dole, have babies on the dole, and don't do a stroke of work if they can avoid it. The other day I went to the local

Labour Exchange to get some fellows for haymaking. An easy job, free beer, and a good week's wage. I couldn't get a man!"

"I don't blame them," said Jerningham. "Upon my soul, I don't. If they did your haymaking they would get off the dole and lose their insurance. In their place I would do the same. Under a system of free keep without work, who would be fool enough to choose work?"

"Not you, Father, anyhow," said Pearl.

"I agree, my poppet," answered her father, "although I did happen to fight for my country in time of war. But then I enjoyed it."

Audrey Avenel looked at Brandon and saw his face flush, and read his secret thoughts and answered for him.

"The men fought too. We can't let them starve to death, can we, now that trade is so bad and there's no work for many of them?"

"That's the difficulty," said Colonel Avenel. "I admit that. It's the abuse of the dole that's so terrible. And all this socialism which gives everything for nothing. It's our class that pays most and gets least. It seems to me unfair."

"Personally," said Geoffrey Jerningham, "I would let the blighters starve. That was the old remedy of Mother Nature for readjusting economic distress. No work, no bread."

"No, no!" said Colonel Avenel. "You know you're talking nonsense, Geoff. We have a social conscience nowadays."

"It will have to come," said Jerningham. "When they've sucked us dry by income tax and death duties, and when industry can't compete in foreign markets because of high wages and national laziness—we're the laziest people on God's earth!—the people will either have to work longer for lower wages—mind you, I'm sorry for them—or clear out of this overpopulated country to overseas dominions, where there is heaps of room for them. . . . Or they must die of destitution. That's logic. Very unpleasant, but inescapable."

Brandon was tempted to intervene in the argument. He was inclined to tell them something about the East End which he had known as a doctor's son and the transfiguration which had happened in mean streets because of a more decent standard of living. If one class, this old privileged class, was going down, the mass of the people had been lifted up from squalor and serfdom. He thought the price was worth it, even if the Jerninghams and the Avenels had to disappear as far as their old order was concerned. After all, Audrey and that sharp-tongued sister of hers would get more fun out of life

in hat shops and city offices. They were longing to escape from walled gardens. Perhaps men like Jerningham exaggerated the evil of the dole—unemployed insurance, really. His own belief was that it had saved England from revolution. The working men, he knew, hated the dole and enforced idleness. Of course there were slackers—too many of them——

His mind strayed away for a moment to the eternal argument about democracy. He had argued it out for hours with Val Foster. He wasn't quite so sure as he used to be that democracy was the ideal form of state. It was probably true that politicians bribed the electorate with promises which could only be fulfilled at the price of weakness and pauperization. The pendulum was swinging too far, perhaps. But these people had had a long innings, at the expense of sweated labour, and their forefathers had been utterly callous, steeped in self-complacency, hoarding wealth when men and women were starving. The Hungry Forties. . . .

These ideas floated through his mind, but he did not utter them because of his social shyness. In any case, it was his job as a writing man to listen and watch. These people were interesting. He might put them into a book one day. . . .

The girl on his right had something to say to him, after ignoring him completely while she chatted gaily with young Avenel.

"Do you ever see Lydia Beaumont these days?"

Brandon looked into her eyes, so darkly blue, for a moment.

"Do you know all my friends?" he asked.

"Only by name and reputation," she told him with a smile that had a glint of mischief in it. "Mr. Foster is good at portraits, though he is apt to caricature. He took me to the Pen and Palette Club when I was in town, and I saw the originals. But you were missing that night. Sorry! . . . He said you had gone to save your soul in Surrey."

"Extremely impudent of him," said Brandon sulkily.

So Val Foster had given him away to this girl whom he had kept as a dark secret. There would be a row about that when next they met. Obviously he had told her all about Lydia Beaumont.

"May I ask," continued Miss Jerningham, with innocent eyes which concealed a hint of mirth, "whether by any chance you *have* saved your soul in Surrey? Now, if it had been Sussex——"

Brandon knew she was pulling his leg and didn't quite like the process.

"It was my joke first," he explained rather lamely. "Val Foster adopted it. It's a habit he has."

"Still, I must say he's amusing on his own account," said Miss Jerningham. "We behaved outrageously in that cheap *pension*, and our laughter shocked the old cats."

"Old cats?"

He was not quite sure if she meant that literally.

"The old ladies from West Kensington," she explained. "They sit around watchful for any hint of impropriety. They had a distinct impression that I was on the road to ruin with a wayside tramp. Of course, Mr. Foster's clothes are rather disreputable when he's on a holiday. He tied up his braces with a bit of string, and borrowed two safety pins from one of the old ladies to keep his socks up."

Brandon grinned. That was certainly characteristic of his artistic friend. He was very careless of conventionality.

"We don't dress well in the writing and painting line," he remarked. "Not unless we become Royal Academicians or best sellers. Then we are rather apt to become elderly dandies and put away our ancient rags, like certain successful rivals of mine."

She knew those he had left unnamed and mentioned one of them.

"Dear old Arnold Bennett!"

"Isn't poverty detestable?" she said presently. "Don't I know its abomination? Last season's frocks, cheap hotels, second-class fares. How I hate it all!"

"I rather like it," said Brandon. "I could do with a bit more for foreign travel now and then, but I've no yearnings for luxury and wealth. It would be a great nuisance."

She was astounded and amused.

"Are you a saint or a stoic? Val Foster told me that you were one of the world's idealists."

"I'm easily tempted," he assured her, with the flicker of a smile.

She couldn't believe that. She could see by his face, she said, that he was one of those hermit souls withdrawn from the naughty world and all seductions. No vamps allowed. Fleshpots strictly prohibited. High thoughts and low living.

"You don't know the appalling licentiousness of my subconscious mind," he told her, and that remark was the cause of a very pleasing laugh.

"I feel safe with you. Val Foster tells me that you are utterly immune against the wiles of women. A very gentil parfit knight, with whom a maid might walk in dark woods without a tremor."

"There's a pleasant copse behind Harley Hall," he said with apparent irrelevance, and she thought that he revealed more humour than she had expected in him.

At the end of the table Audrey Avenel was watching them with interest and amusement.

"Now then, Pearl!" she said, taking advantage of a lull in the conversation of her elders. "None of your Monte Carlo stuff at this table!"

"On the contrary, my child," said Pearl Jerningham, "Mr. Brandon and I are talking about psychoanalysis. I feel in the presence of a rare soul."

She was mocking at him, but in a friendly and amusing way. She talked rather well about the latest novels, which he had not read, being deep in one of his own, and about Rome and Florence and Avignon, and other places to which he hoped to go one day. She had a little trick of smiling into his eyes with her face half turned to him, which he found charming but embarrassing. He rather suspected that she was flirting with him a little, because he happened to be the only man within reach. Well, he enjoyed it for once in a way, and thought it kind of her to give the benefit of her allurement to a shabby fellow like himself, conscious of a frayed cuff and a buttonhole in his shirt front through which his sixpenny stud slipped now and then.

After dinner Brandon made the excuse of his mother's loneliness to leave early, when Colonel Avenel suggested a game of bridge and the girls made a counter suggestion of table tennis upstairs.

Pearl Jerningham gave him an invitation when he said good-bye.

"Won't you come round to tea one day? My old grandmother has some rather nice miniatures. They might interest you."

"Thanks very much," said Brandon, "but I'm rather deep in work just now."

He was unconscious of his lack of enthusiasm, and wondered why Audrey Avenel laughed and said, "Nothing doing, Pearl!"

Young Avenel took him out into the hall and found his hat for him and held it as though it might be infectious—it was a very old hat—but was quite polite.

"Sorry you've got to go so soon, sir," he said civilly, not knowing that the word "sir" made Brandon feel a hundred years old.

Then he made another remark while Brandon put on his raincoat after adjusting the ragged lining in the sleeves.

"Quite attractive, Miss Jerningham—don't you think?"

"Very," said Brandon.

On the way home to Willowbrook Cottage, with a lantern to help in the darkness of an overgrown lane—a rabbit scuttled ahead of him—he had an idea that Pearl Jerningham might be dangerous as well as attractive. A man like himself—absurdly susceptible—would be a fool to look into those blue eyes too much. She hated poverty.

15

WITHOUT deliberate incivility it was difficult for Brandon to avoid taking tea with Pearl Jerningham. She renewed the invitation when she met him in the village one morning and said that her father wanted to show him some eighteenth-century letters which might interest him. He accepted vaguely for "one afternoon," and she looked amused.

"That means you won't come. Shy, aren't you? Or unsocial?"

But he went in spite of shyness and unsociability. She was extremely attractive. It was absurd of him to shirk this invitation because of a little warning bell which rang in his brain. That was sheer egotism or moral cowardice. As if a girl like this would think twice about a shabby fellow living on the poverty line! She wanted to be civil to him because she knew Val Foster, or because he happened to be a friend of the Avenels. So he argued to himself, cursing his self-consciousness, as he strode round to the old house on the green on an afternoon when his mother had gone up to town again.

A neat little maid showed him into the drawing room where a very tall and thin old lady sat at an open French window, looking out to a rose garden whence came the sound of a flute playing some eighteenth-century air. She was dozing over a book, and Brandon knew that she was Mrs. Jerningham, the mother of Mr. Geoffrey Jerningham. He had seen her in the village post office, rapping her stick on the counter because the postmistress was shelling peas in the back parlour and neglecting His Majesty's mails. He had also seen her walking with the aid of the same stick down his own garden when she had called on his mother one day. Now she looked up from her

book when Brandon was shown into the room by the maid, who announced his name and said she would find Miss Jerningham in the garden.

"Good-afternoon," said the old lady. "Are you one of my innumerable nephews or one of Pearl's young men?"

"I have called to see Miss Jerningham," said Brandon, smiling down at her.

The old lady seemed a little deaf.

"Did you say you were Pamela's son? Well, tell your father that I utterly despise him for supporting the Flapper's Vote. I think Mr. Baldwin must have taken leave of his senses. What can those short-frocked hussies know about the political situation?"

"My name is Francis Brandon," said the owner of that name gently. "A neighbour of yours, Mrs. Jerningham."

He repeated it more loudly when she failed to hear.

"Brandon!" she exclaimed with surprise. "I once knew a family of that name. One of the boys made love to me when I was a chit of a thing. I expect he's dead. It's very strange, but almost everybody's dead now. You must be his grandson."

Brandon denied that relationship, but she did not hear him, and asked after his aunt Ursula who had married a bishop.

"You needn't stay talking to me, my dear," she said presently. "I expect you're looking for Pearl. She is probably lying in the garden hammock, showing too much of her legs. But I daresay you will like the look of them."

Brandon made no answer to that, and she did not expect one.

"Your mother Pamela," she said, going back to her first mistake, "was very wise not to marry Geoffrey. Although he's my youngest son, I've no patience with him. He's a spendthrift with charming manners. Of course, he killed his poor wife by his infidelities and recklessness. Now he's spoiling that girl Pearl by dragging her round Europe to all his gambling hells. Wicked, I call it!"

She put a little trumpet to her ear and listened intently.

"Don't I hear a flute?" she asked.

"Yes," said Brandon. "In the garden. It sounds charming."

"That's my son," said the old lady. "He plays the flute like a dancing master. If he hadn't played the fool as well he might have been ambassador in Paris, like his grandfather."

Brandon glanced round the room, panelled like the Avenels' dining room, but painted white. The miniatures which Pearl Jerningham had mentioned were hanging there, and there was a portrait of her father as a young man with side whiskers and humorous eyes. The old lady saw his gaze rove beyond her and smiled at him.

"Well, my dear, don't let me bore you with my chatter. If you want to make love to my granddaughter, you needn't stand on ceremony with a deaf old woman. And if you take my advice, you'll marry the child before she runs off with somebody else's husband. She's like her great-aunt Viola—a home breaker. It's in the blood, you know, since the time of Charles II, when Lettice Jerningham ran away with that pot-house poet—what was his name? It began with a B. Or did it begin with an S? Anyhow, she had an illegitimate child, as I've no doubt you remember. What *was* the fellow's name?"

Brandon was rescued by Pearl Jerningham, who came through the garden window. She stood there, framed for a moment, with the rose garden as her background—a good portrait for Orpen or some lucky artist. She looked exquisite, he thought, and felt his heart give a lurch in a very odd way.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," she said. "Has my granny been raking up the family scandals?"

Like all deaf old ladies, this one overheard the remark not intended to reach her.

"There will be another one before you've reached my age, my dear," she said rather sharply. "You're the living image of your great-aunt Viola. I think I have told you that before."

"A million times, Granny!" said Pearl Jerningham gaily. "But my great-aunt Viola lived before we were all poverty-stricken. She had more agreeable temptations. Don't you think you had better go to your room and write that letter to Uncle Richard?"

The old lady suspected a trap.

"Oh, yes, you want to get rid of me! As if I didn't know. Well, perhaps I'll oblige you. Kindly give me my stick, young man."

Brandon picked up the crooked stick and handed it to the old lady and helped her out of her chair. For a moment she stood there with a smile that wavered between him and her granddaughter.

"You're a pretty puss!" she said to Pearl Jerningham. "Don't break that young man's heart. I can see he's bewitched by you."

Brandon blushed slightly at Pearl Jerningham's laughing glance.

"Nonsense, Granny! This gentleman is a confirmed bachelor. He despises foolish females. He is also rather afraid of them, I think."

It was a good shot of hers. He was certainly afraid of Pearl Jerningham. He was afraid of her beauty and some indefinable allurement which touched his senses. But he denied her diagnosis and that charge of being a confirmed bachelor.

"Not at all," he said. "Secretly I have the instincts of a Don Juan."

She laughed at this absurdity, belied by the ascetic look of his face.

"St. Francis!" she replied. "Wedded to holy poverty."

She gave him tea and talked to him about Val Foster and country life and the Avenel girls.

"They're dears," she said, referring to Sylvia and Audrey. "It's a pity they can't get married. There are no nice boys in this secluded vale. At least, none who can afford to marry them. It's awful, isn't it, the dearth of marriageable males? What's going to happen to the teeming sisterhood? We have our freedom but no mates."

Brandon answered cautiously:

"Perhaps the modern girl demands too much."

Pearl Jerningham put up a defense.

"The Audreys and Sylvias shirk squalor, certainly. They won't face a maisonette in a mean street with no room for the perambulator."

"It might be rather amusing," suggested Brandon. "I know a man who thinks it a tremendous joke. His father is a Canon of Canterbury."

"I wonder if his wife sees the joke," asked Pearl Jerningham. "Any babies?"

"Three."

"Good heavens, the man ought to be prosecuted! In these days of enlightenment!"

She shuddered over her teacup and passed him the cake and interested him by revealing an episode of the past.

"I might have married a man like that shortly after the war when those who came back were feeling emotional. He was an ex-officer with one leg and two hundred a year, and a bed-sitting room in Oakley Street. He wanted me to share his bed-sitting room."

"Why not," asked Brandon, "if he was a nice fellow?"

She laughed at his simple sentiment and suspected its insincerity.

"I like more elbow room, and a bathroom to myself, and a way of escape to pleasant places."

Brandon thought over that remark and was aware of her smiling eyes, observant of his shabbiness. He had been rather a fool to come, he thought. She was only mocking at him, to pass the time. He was surprised that she remembered back to the war. Perhaps she was one of those little war flappers who flirted with young officers before they died. Eighteen, perhaps, when the war ended. Still something under thirty, but almost as young looking as Audrey Avenel.

"Well," he said, to carry on the conversation, with a shy man's nervousness of lapsing into silence, "there were other men with two legs who didn't live in Oakley Street. Some of them are still alive."

"Here and there," she admitted. "There's a charming man I know who keeps pedigree pigs in Sussex. More often than not they have foot-and-mouth disease, so that he is not very prosperous. He wanted me to keep pigs with him."

"They're harmless beasts," said Brandon thoughtfully.

Too aromatic, she thought.

She referred again to the lack of youth or even of agreeable men who were not entirely without visible means of subsistence. She was very sorry for that girl Audrey. The war and the social revolution seemed to have swept away the class of young men who had reasonable expectations and something more than three pounds a week. She went around searching for them, wistfully, as she candidly admitted.

"Surely they cluster on the Riviera?" suggested Brandon. "Princes in exile. The sons of American millionaires. Gilded youth galore."

"Not in the hotels that Father and I frequent," she told him. "They are mostly elderly colonels saving their income tax. In the morning they read the Paris edition of the *Daily Mail* and curse the Labour Party. In the afternoon they play golf and curse the caddies. At half-past four they amble into the Scottish tea rooms at Nice, Cannes, or Mentone, and make a loud hawing at the back of their throats, and curse the climate over toasted buns. That's gay life on the Côte d'Azur. Not a marriage market for girls like the Avenels, poor darlings. Not that they can afford to go there. We're all poverty-stricken."

She showed him the miniatures, including the portrait of her great-aunt Viola, who had been a naughty lady.

“Do you think I’m like her?” she asked, turning her face so that he could compare it with the portrait of a girl with sloping shoulders in a low bodice and flounced crinoline.

Brandon avoided her eyes and studied the little painting on porcelain.

“There’s a family likeness,” he said. “Something about the eyes and mouth.”

“She was reputed to be a great beauty in her time,” remarked Pearl Jerningham, smiling at him sideways.

“I can quite believe it,” he answered gravely, and he was pleased when she laughed and accused him of diplomacy.

“Sometimes,” she confessed, “I think I’ve inherited her character. No real sense of morality—a love of luxury—incurable laziness. It’s all the fault of my great-aunt Viola when I do the things I ought to have left undone. Terrible, isn’t it, the influence of heredity? One can’t escape it. One is just haunted by naughty old grandmothers and flighty old aunts. I call it unfair.”

She talked a lot of nonsense charmingly. Brandon enjoyed himself and forgot his shyness with women now and then. He was successful in making her laugh more than once, and was disappointed when her father came in with a flute under his arm.

“Having a look at the miniatures?” he asked. “Amusing, aren’t they? One of these days I shall have to sell them to some American with wads of dollars. I believe there’s a Rubens in the morning room. If it isn’t a copy it’s worth a lot of money. One of these days I must persuade the old lady to part with it. It might ease the financial situation and let me try my system at Monte on a really sound basis.”

“Father!” cried Pearl. “You’re incorrigible. You’ll drag us down to ruin with that absurd system of yours.”

She spoke severely, but there was laughter in her eyes, and she put her arm round her father’s shoulder.

“My pretty slut,” he said, “don’t you know we’re ruined already? Haven’t the tax collectors skinned us alive? Will there be anything left for my old age when death duties have been duly collected over your grandmother’s coffin? We belong to an ancient caste which has no more place in the scheme of things. You and I are the living ghosts of a dead world which disappeared in the great war. We are the dispossessed. The social revolution is accomplished, and this country belongs to the mob and the tradesmen.”

He put his hand on Brandon’s shoulder.

"As a literary man," he said, "you ought to write a novel about the passing of old England and its descent into one of the minor powers like Belgium—overpopulated, living on its tourist traffic, essentially bourgeois and shabby without being genteel. As you are doubtless aware, my dear sir, the end of the industrial era is in sight, and we have already lost our commercial supremacy. The New Rich are rapidly becoming the new poor. Very shortly we shall lose India, Egypt, and the last link with the overseas Dominions. We have also lost our manners, our ancient code of honour, and our spirit of adventure. Tradition has been abandoned by modern youth, and intellectual Bolshevism has invaded the minds of our leaders of thought. The Church is in the hands of men who do not believe in the Christian revelation. The government—Conservative or Labour—offers new bribes to an electorate which gets everything for nothing at the expense of those who possess inherited or acquired wealth—almost exhausted. As a man of little virtue and easy-going nature, I do not feel called to go into the market place and cry, 'Woe, Woe,' to the children of iniquity. On the contrary, I get a good deal of amusement out of life, touched with that cynicism which is the quality of a philosophical mind, and when the morning paper is unusually depressing I steal away into a private room or a green glade and play a little Bach on a flute which belonged to one of my ancestors who was a friend of Pepys. Bach, my dear Brandon, takes one's mind away from the advancing squalor of a very vulgar world."

Pearl Jerningham listened to this oration by her father with a smiling resignation and a mischievous glance or two at Brandon to see how he was taking it.

"Father!" she cried at the end of it, "you're boring Mr. Brandon to death, and he doesn't agree with a word you say."

Mr. Jerningham laughed good-naturedly.

"I talk a deal of nonsense," he said. "But I honestly believe some of it. Come and see the alleged Rubens. It's probably a copy."

Pearl Jerningham gave her hand to Brandon when he left and told him that she intended calling on his mother. She also thanked him for wasting his valuable time upon a person like herself, without pretensions to intellectual quality.

As Brandon walked down the front drive he had to fall back a moment to the grass border, to avoid being swept down by an expensive-looking car which went round with a swerve to the front door of the Jerninghams' house. It was driven by a middle-aged man, heavily built, with a soft collar rather too tight for his neck, whom Brandon happened to know by sight. It

was Cyril Chantry, who came down for week-ends to an old farmhouse which he had modernized regardless of expense, and who had bought up a good deal of the land in the neighbourhood for future building sites.

By one of those absurd psychological tricks which betray imaginative men, Brandon had taken a dislike to him and was annoyed because he was calling on the Jerninghams. He had successfully avoided the man since that lift in his car on a wet day.

That evening was a failure as regards literary work. The little bell on his typewriter failed to ring. Pearl Jerningham's face—extraordinarily like her great-aunt Viola—came between his blank paper and his mental vision. He went over their conversation again. He had made some very foolish remarks because of his nervousness. She had been extremely charming to him.

16

Mrs. Brandon was aware of a certain restlessness about her son at this time. He was not sleeping well at nights, she thought. Several times she heard him pacing up and down his bedroom two hours or more after going to bed. Once she heard him go to his window and lean out. It was a moonlight night, as she could see by the pale glimmer through her own window blinds. Perhaps he was getting some inspiration from the loveliness of the night, with a full moon flooding the fields with a kind of milky radiance, as she had noticed before putting out her lamp two hours ago. That was the worst of having a son who painted pictures in words. Far better if he had gone to sleep. She waited for his footsteps to leave the window and the creak of old boards again which would tell her that he was getting into bed. But an hour passed and he still stood at the window without a sound until quite clearly after that hour she heard him say something as though speaking in the garden or at her own window.

"Nothing doing, my lad!" he said with a kind of ironical resignation.

It was that woman Pearl Jerningham. Mrs. Brandon was certain of it. Ever since she had come to Harley Green after going abroad with her father —a most objectionable man, thought Mrs. Brandon—Frank had been unsettled and somehow different. He had been to see that creature several times at her grandmother's house on the green, and Mrs. Brandon knew that they went for walks together, generally in the woods beyond the heath. He

had let that out accidentally, or at least reluctantly, when she had questioned him about what he had been doing.

"As a matter of fact, I met Miss Jerningham. She was taking her dog out for a walk. I strolled the same way for a while."

She could see by his shy eyes—shy even of her—that he felt self-conscious about this encounter. And his eyes had an inner light which alarmed his mother. It was the kind of look he had when he was excited by some distant view or by cloud effects when there was a good sunset, only it was more intense. And there was a secret smile about his lips, as though he hid some pleasurable reminiscence.

"I met Pearl Jerningham," he said another time. "She likes those woods beyond the heath. I've met her there once or twice—curiously enough."

"Very curiously," said Mrs. Brandon drily. "Don't you think you had better avoid them in future? Because of your work, I mean."

"Oh, I don't know," he answered carelessly. "One must talk to a human being now and then. One can't work incessantly."

That was perfectly true. Mrs. Brandon had often urged him to be a little more sociable and to get away from his writing now and then. But she wished that he had not chosen that particular human being—or had not been chosen by her. She was too dangerously attractive, and obviously unsuited to Frank in every way. Mrs. Brandon had heard a good deal about her from Mrs. Avenel, who did not care for her very much. According to Mrs. Avenel, she was not a good influence on Sylvia and Audrey, being rather loose in her ideas after living abroad so much with her eccentric father. She had been engaged for a time to an Italian count, but had broken it off because he had whipped her dog.

It was extraordinary that Frank of all men should have been attracted by a woman like that—a professional flirt, or at least a heartless little thing who liked the admiration of any man and laid herself out for it—restless, dissatisfied, and adventurous. That was how Mrs. Brandon summed her up when she had called round once or twice with her father and directed all her conversation to Frank, who seemed spellbound and enchanted. Certainly she was gay and vivacious, and nobody could deny her good looks—but she made no secret of the fact that she was in search of a rich husband. She said so in front of her father and Frank one afternoon.

"I'm so tired of doing things on the cheap," she said, and made a little speech about it. Cheap boarding houses at Mentone, and second-class fares and second-rate hotels, and last summer's frocks, and no pocket money for

all the little luxuries which she considered necessary for the amenities of life.

"What you ought to do, my lass," said her father, "is to marry a rich young fellow who would give you all the things I can't afford and provide me with something to play with at Monte now and then."

"I agree, Father," she said. "I'm waiting for the chance, but no rich young man comes speeding in my direction, in spite of all the Rolls-Royces rushing along down the Hog's Back and passing us in our miserable little Citroën which we bought second-hand from old Thingummy."

Those flippant words seemed to amuse her father. But Mrs. Brandon disapproved of that kind of talk. The girl might have meant it to be humorous, but it wasn't funny to Frank, who had lost his heart to her.

Mrs. Brandon was certain of that. He was conquering his shyness so that he accepted invitations to neighbours' houses where he knew he would meet her. He even went to a garden party at Lady Lamberton's, where all the neighbourhood was present. Mrs. Brandon had gone with him, astonished that he should agree to go to such an affair, from which formerly he would have shrunk in horror. She was sorry to see him looking shabby among all these well dressed people, some of whom had come from town. She heard a smart-looking girl in a short frock far too high above her knees ask about him, after staring at him for a moment.

"Who is that shabby-looking man who looks as if he had slept in his trousers?"

It was Audrey Avenel who answered, not knowing that Mrs. Brandon was within earshot on the other side of the herbaceous border.

"That shabby man is Francis Brandon, the novelist, who has more brains than anyone here, which is not saying much. He's a darling."

"I thought he might be a tramp who had come to steal the spoons," said the other girl.

"If he condescended to know a chit like you he might steal your heart, if you had one," said Audrey Avenel, rather heatedly.

"Oh, that's how you feel about him, is it?" said the other girl with a light laugh. "Well, I don't admire your taste, Audrey."

Mrs. Brandon had overheard that conversation with annoyance and astonishment. Annoyance because of those impudent remarks about her son's appearance—he certainly did look shabby, but then he was very careless about his clothes—and astonishment because Audrey Avenel had spoken so warmly about him. Was it possible that this child had lost her

heart to poor old Frank? No, that was absurd. There was a considerable difference in age between them, and anyhow, Audrey and he were just good friends. He treated her now like a younger sister, and Mrs. Brandon felt reassured about it. It was a nice companionship for him with that amusing family. It was the other one she was afraid of, Pearl, as he had begun to call her.

There she was, surrounded by a group of Surrey people, some of those elderly colonels who swarmed in the district between Aldershot and Guildford, and some weedy-looking young men from town, by the look of them, and the vicar of their own village, on the outside edge, bringing her an ice—all of them fascinated by some quality she had. "What they call sex appeal in the movies," thought Mrs. Brandon, watching the little group hovering about that young woman who had fascinated her son. She was making little jokes, laughing, flashing her eyes at them, looking pleased with herself in a garden-party frock for which she probably hadn't paid, if she was as poor as she made out. She was pretty, certainly, but not beautiful, thought Mrs. Brandon critically. She was too thin to be really beautiful, and without that bronze-coloured hair and those rather deep-blue eyes she might have been called plain, if one analyzed her features.

Well, perhaps that was unfair. Mrs. Brandon thought she might be a little prejudiced because Frank was so taken with this creature. She could see him talking with Lady Lamberton, shyly and awkwardly, with his hands in his jacket pockets, and his mother noticed with a pang that his glance kept straying towards the group where Pearl Jerningham was enjoying herself, basking in male adulation. Presently Lady Lamberton detached herself from him to attend to other guests, and he searched round for his mother and came towards her.

"Well, Frank," she asked, "how are you getting on?"

"This is very trying," he said. "It's not my element, really, and I feel out of the picture. Have you had an ice, Mother? Can I get you some strawberries and cream?"

"I've had two ices and one strawberries and cream," Mrs. Brandon told him, seeing again how his glance roved towards that Jerningham girl. "Audrey Avenel brought me the first ice and was carried off by a young man with a stutter. The vicar brought me the second and dodged off before I could get a word in edgewise, and the strawberries were brought to me by an old general who had just swallowed a cherry stone and asked me what he should do about it."

Geoffrey Jerningham had approached them at this moment and made one of his flamboyant speeches to her son, after bowing to Mrs. Brandon with exaggerated courtesy.

"A chapter for a novel, my dear lad," he said. "All these people here are playing a game of make-believe. They're pretending that they are perfectly safe in a Surrey garden. They're chattering about the best soil for roses and whether they are going to the Aldershot tattoo. They shut their ears to the snarl of the tax collector lying in wait for them behind the hedges. They do not hear the menacing murmurs of the unemployed in Sheffield and Durham and our other cities. They do not look at the cracking of the ground beneath their feet and the gulf of ruin into which their roses and their antirrhinums will go with a crash unless there is a dictator in England who will go chase out our futile politicians and teach the people that if they want to play they must work first, and abolish the state-subsidized laziness of the proletariat. Allow me to get you an ice, Mrs. Brandon."

Mrs. Brandon declined the ice and saw that her son had disappeared from her side. Somehow or other Pearl Jerningham had slipped away from her group of admirers. She had her hand on Frank's arm in a comradely way and was walking with him towards Lady Lamberton's rose garden. In her garden-party frock, very short above her knees, she looked about eighteen, though she must have been nearly thirty, and even Mrs. Brandon was aware of the striking contrast she made with her ill-dressed son, who had an old felt hat on the back of his head and a pair of gray flannel trousers, very baggy, beneath a sports coat which he had bought ready-made in London.

"I'm getting anxious about Pearl," said her father, speaking seriously for once. "She frets because of my infernal poverty and because she does not find enough to do when we winter abroad 'on the cheap,' as she calls it. Sometimes I wish she would marry, though I should hate to lose her. We're the best of comrades, though I daresay she finds me very trying sometimes. An old eccentric like me."

Mrs. Brandon was getting anxious about her son.

"I hope she'll find a husband to suit her," she said quietly.

Mr. Jerningham laughed as he lit a cigarette, first asking permission, and then putting the burnt match very carefully into one of Lady Lamberton's flower beds.

"I hope she won't run off with some beggarly foreign chap—one of those Russian refugees—or some penniless boy who can't afford to keep her. She's a wench with expensive tastes, like her Dad. It's in the blood.

Love in a cottage wouldn't suit Pearl, but she might risk it for the sake of romantic adventure or a break-away from boredom."

"I hope she won't risk it," said Mrs. Brandon sincerely. "It would be rather fatal, I think."

"There's a financial bug in town who is very much smitten with her," said Mr. Jerningham, who seemed to be in a confidential mood. He had been round to Willowbrook Cottage several times, and it had been difficult to get rid of him before midnight.

"What do you mean exactly by a 'financial bug'?" asked Mrs. Brandon.

Mr. Jerningham laughed.

"Not a bug biologically, my dear Mrs. Brandon. I mean to say he's a gold bug, so to speak, one of those conjurors who makes wads of money out of financial juggling while his unfortunate country staggers beneath a burden of taxation which he successfully avoids. I can't think how those fellows do it. It's a secret I've never been able to solve—like the law of averages on the green cloth. Anyhow, he's been courting Pearl with serious intent. It's our neighbour Cyril Chantry up at Yeoman's Farm. Not a bad fellow really, though hardly what you might call a gentleman of the old school. Pearl is fairly civil to him, but not encouraging. If she could bring herself to like him she could live like a duchess and hand out a bit to poor old Pa. Not that I urge her in any way. Pearl knows that I put her happiness first. Still—it would be nice for my tailor and other tradesmen."

He broke off and changed the subject.

"A charming picture, Mrs. Brandon, don't you think? England at its best. A pleasant garden, velvet lawns, youth and beauty, old age hiding its wrinkles, and its stiff knees, and its inevitable resignation, peaches ripening on old walls, and a sense of peace. Not real or permanent, you know. The social revolution goes on creeping out to Surrey. Some of these city men with big houses round about the Hog's Back are getting anxious. Trade depression, supertax, world unrest, trouble in India, Egypt, God knows where, and in my opinion the end of England as a great power. The spirit has gone out of us. Democracy has won its victory with the inevitable consequences of digging its own grave. How exquisite those massed poppies look in Lady Lamberton's flower beds! Charming, charming!"

Mrs. Brandon had been on pins and needles until her son came back with the Jerningham girl. He had that inner light in his eyes, that secret smile about his lips. And that night he had paced up and down again in his

bedroom and leaned out of the window, watching the stars, or listening to the squeaking of a baby owl, or the rustle of leaves in a soft breeze.

Then one evening he sat pretending to read a book, deep sunk in an armchair, with the lamplight on the table next to him touching one side of his face. He was not really reading, she could see that, and several times he stirred uneasily. Once he went out onto the veranda, and she could hear him striding up and down the gravelled walk. Presently he stopped, and she heard him give a kind of groan, and when he came back his face looked drawn and tired, and there was a line of pain about his lips.

"I think I'll turn in early to-night," he said, before eleven had struck by the grandfather's clock in the hall—an antique they had bought in Guildford as the result of one of his short stories.

"Won't you wait and hear the news on the wireless?" she asked.

"Oh, confound the news!" he answered irritably, and then was conscience-stricken and begged her pardon.

"A bit of a headache," he explained.

He went slowly upstairs, and she heard his footsteps on the old boards overhead, and after an hour of silence one boot drop by the side of his bed. She waited half an hour before the other boot dropped. Then she too went to bed, but could not sleep because of what her son was suffering in the next room. She knew that he had been hard hit by that affair with Pearl Jerningham, who was perfectly heartless and had just used him for a country flirtation and then no doubt had dropped him, the little wretch. It was because Frank was so sensitive and idealistic that he was suffering now.

Mrs. Brandon slipped out of bed and put on a dressing gown and went to his door. His light was still up, as she could see by its gleam underneath.

When she tapped he did not answer for a moment, and then said, "Hullo, Mother!" and opened the door.

"Would you like an aspirin?" she asked.

He laughed at her, amused by her question.

"I'm afraid aspirin is no good for my particular form of headache," he answered.

"My poor boy!" she said, putting her arm round his shoulder and drawing his head down to kiss him on the forehead.

"That's all right," he said in his shy way. "No bones broken or anything like that. These little things will happen, if one is not extremely careful. How is it you're not asleep?"

That was the nearest he got to an explanation. There were some secrets he kept from her.

17

He had made a complete fool of himself that afternoon before a restless night when his mother had come to his room. It was a folly into which he had gone with his eyes open and into which he had been drifting for weeks, fully aware that he was asking for trouble. Over and over again he had heard that little warning bell in his brain. *Danger! Keep off the grass. Cut and run.*

Absurd phrases like these had repeated themselves in his brain. Sometimes he had even spoken them aloud on lonely walks. But they were terribly insincere, or at least he had not the moral courage to act upon the advice of his subconscious mind, because those walks led him deliberately to places where he knew there might be a chance of meeting Pearl Jerningham and at the time when it was most likely. She always walked out with her dog, a black spaniel, between midday and the luncheon hour, and, as she once told him, she liked the walk past the church, across the stile, through the copse of silver birches, and on to Yeoman's Farm, belonging to Cyril Chantry, which was always a good picture with its black barns and red-tiled outhouses and high gables over old beams on the edge of Quarry Woods. Her afternoon walk between tea and dinner led her to the top of the heath, up the narrow lane leading past his own cottage. It would have been very simple for Brandon, with that knowledge, to avoid the lady by going rapidly in other directions or at other times. He failed to do so. On the contrary, he changed his own writing hours and was pulled away from his typewriter by some irresistible force which he pretended was the sun, or the need of fresh air, or the extraordinarily fine light over the landscape.

Pearl Jerningham teased him by reproaches that he was neglecting his work.

"Surely you ought to be writing that novel," she said. "Isn't this the best time of day for good work?"

Of course she knew perfectly well that he had abandoned work in order to meet her. She knew, with the unfailing intuition of a woman in the presence of an amorous male, that she attracted him. He gave himself away because of the admiration which shone through his shy glance at her now and then, though otherwise he avoided a direct look, especially when she

turned her face to him to laugh into his eyes. When she took off her hat to let the wind blow through her bronze-tinted hair his colour heightened because of its glory. When she held his hand once to jump over a brook with a muddy margin she must have felt the thrill which ran up his arm. When she sat by his side on the great gnarled roots of a giant oak above Yeoman's Farm and demanded a cigarette from him, he was abashed and disconcerted because their shoulders touched, and she must have noticed that he edged away.

She tried to break down his reserve by candid questions and indiscreet remarks intended, as he knew, to shock his sense of reticence and his endeavour to keep the conversation strictly formal. She laid little traps for him which would have meant self-revelation on his part—about Lydia Beaumont, for instance—if he had fallen into them, and she was amused when he avoided them by deliberate irrelevance. Now and again she succeeded in removing his mask or in drawing him out on subjects which generally he hated to talk about—his philosophy of life, his literary ambitions, his devotion to his mother, his views about marriage and love. Nearly always she laughed at his point of view.

It seemed to her lamentable that he should take life so seriously and worry himself so needlessly about the moral side of things, and other people's troubles, and the state of the world, and the future of the human race, and the possibility of preventing another war.

"My dear Mr. Brandon," she said—that was before she had drifted into the habit of calling him Frank—"you alarm me by your exalted idealism."

He denied exalted idealism. He insisted that he was a realist trying to get nearer to the truth of life.

"But there's no truth," she argued. "Hasn't some old Jew called Epstein —or is it Einstein?—made everything relative? I mean, there's no absolute truth. It's just how we feel. I feel flippant at the present time. To-morrow I may feel devotional, though I fear not. We create our own gods and devils, don't we? Life is what it seems to us. To me it seems a mysterious kind of joke by some Almighty Jester who mocks at us. I try to see the fun of it."

"That's dreadful pessimism," said Brandon. "There must be a law somewhere. There must be some purpose in life. There ought to be more happiness, but for our own stupidities."

She cried out against his charge of pessimism. She found life extremely amusing, apart from inevitable boredom now and then. As for happiness, she always lived in hope of finding it round the next corner.

"What's your idea of happiness?" asked Brandon.

"What's yours?" she demanded.

He didn't give himself away that time. He pretended that his highest idea of happiness was to write a novel which would be read largely on the instalment system and never come to an end. That would avoid the necessity of thinking out a new plot. His secret idea of happiness at the moment was to know that he had the love of this girl who mocked at him, and to know that he could look into her laughing eyes without getting scared, and that her beauty should stay with him . . . and he knew that he was a fool in thinking such things.

"My idea of happiness," said Pearl Jerningham, "is purely sensual."

She knew she had shocked him that time, and her laughter startled a robin—not red-breasted yet—who peered at them from the topmost twig of a gorse bush.

"Sensual, but not selfish," she explained. "I want lots of money, but I shouldn't spend it all on myself. I should like to give Father a good time after providing myself with all the little luxuries which I deem necessary to my bodily comfort and spiritual satisfaction. I should like to give perpetual house parties to interesting people and load them with gifts at parting. I should like a rich husband who would spoil me and deck me out in purple and fine linen, in the very latest fashion."

"And you'd get bored to death," said Brandon. "And you'd hate your husband. And you would cry out to God for something better to do—some spiritual purpose."

Pearl Jerningham raised her hands—pretty hands, with pointed nails nicely manicured.

"There he is again!" she cried. "That dreadful word 'purpose'! What purpose? Why purpose? Do we not fulfil our destiny by living and dying? Has that robin any spiritual purpose? The little beggar does all right if it keeps alive and mates with a lady robin and produces little baby robins and grubs enough worms for the family. Isn't that what men and women are meant to do?"

"Precisely," said Brandon. "But that's the snag. Human life isn't as easy as all that. Some poor robins don't get enough worms. Or one of them chooses a lady robin who wants more worms than he can provide. And the baby robins revolt against their parents, just as that fellow does, only with more complicated trouble to the human family. Then war comes and smashes up the nest. Or some robins steal the grub of the other fellows, and

inside the head of every robin there is a mysterious thing called ‘conscience,’ and an equally mysterious yearning to get into closer touch with the Cause of robins and worms, and the sky above the gorse bush, and the things behind the sky. You see how difficult it all is!”

Pearl Jerningham made big eyes and stared up at the sky with a little comical grimace.

“I feel my flippancy is slightly chilled,” she remarked. “The man convinces me of sin. He’s one of those rare souls who make me feel melancholy, as when I hear the sound of church bells and I am playing bridge with my father’s friends on a sunny Sunday afternoon.”

They talked like that—absurdly.

Going home, after leaving her outside the house on the green, Brandon was abashed by the childish nonsense he had talked, and by the fool way in which he had allowed this girl to get beneath his armour with her sense of humour. She laughed at him, and the worst of it was that he liked her laughter. She mocked at him, and he liked her mockery. She refused to take anything seriously, not life nor death, and he was amused by her flippancy. He liked the quick turn of her head, the pretty grimaces she made, the music of her voice, the grace of her body, the mirth in her eyes. He was, in fact, in love with her.

Then, one afternoon when they sat on a bank above Yeoman’s Farm, looking at a distant view of Surrey woods through a gap in the trees, he noticed that she was nervous and excited about something. She was not paying the slightest attention to something he was saying, and several times laughed for no reason at all that he could guess, and then became silent and thoughtful while she poked the dead leaves at her feet with a bit of stick she had broken from a hedge.

“I’ve something to tell you,” she said presently. “Great news!”

“It must be good news,” he remarked, seeing the brightness and excitement in her eyes.

“Not too bad,” she answered. “It will make a difference to me. I shall be able to escape from poverty and squalor. No need for second-class fares and cheap hotels and last season’s frocks. Everything that the heart of sensual woman desires, with something over for her family and friends. Father is very pleased.”

“Good,” said Brandon. “Has he inherited a fortune from one of his aunts?”

He had an uneasy feeling that this was not the right guess.

"Not exactly that," said Pearl Jerningham, laughing again.

She turned to look at him, and he saw a sort of tenderness in her eyes, a kind of comradeship.

"I'm engaged to be married," she told him.

He felt a stab at his heart but did not blink an eyelid, having excellent control of his facial muscles.

"A pleasant fellow?" he asked quietly.

For a moment she did not answer, and a little flush of colour crept into her face.

"Kind," she said, after that pause. "Very fond of me. Eager to be generous."

She mentioned his name and watched to see what effect it had upon him.

"Cyril Chantry. . . . The owner of that old house down there, with another in Cadogan Square, London, S. W. . . . He gave you a lift in his car once, he tells me. He likes you."

Brandon looked at the old house down there—they were sitting above its tall chimney stacks and ancient tiles. He could see into its courtyard surrounded by black old barns. One of Cyril Chantry's peacocks was giving its harsh cry. Three of his horses were grazing in a field beyond the barns. Some of his cattle were in the meadows around. His gardeners were mowing his tennis lawn, just visible beyond a line of tall hollyhocks. In the garage, converted from one of the old barns, his second chauffeur was cleaning down one of his expensive cars, as Brandon had noticed when passing with this girl at his side. He had wondered why she had looked over the low wall and laughed at all that activity of Cyril Chantry's staff. Now he knew.

So she was engaged to that financial shark with a neck too tight for his collar, and heavy hunched shoulders, and a pale, flabby face. This girl of the old caste, so exquisite, so flower-like, a thing of grace, was going to hand herself over to a middle-aged man who had made a pot of money by financial operations and clever tax-dodging, according to her own father. There could be no question of love or sentiment on her side. It would be a surrender of all pride and tradition.

Just for a moment he made a fool of himself by letting her see his emotion, his disapproval—as though he had a right to disapprove.

"A charming love match!" he said bitterly. "A romance of youth and middle age. Old family for new wealth."

Pearl Jerningham put her hand on his for a moment and was not angry with him.

"It sounds sordid," she said. "In a way it is sordid, I admit that. But he's very much in love with me, Frank. Quite honestly. It isn't a sudden affair. He asked me three years ago. He has been very faithful, and I'm fond of him. He's kind and amusing and generous."

"Is that quite good enough?" asked Brandon.

Pearl Jerningham shrugged her shoulders.

"It's not too bad. Most marriages become a compromise, don't they? Young love wears out pretty soon, judging from some of those I know. A middle-aged man doesn't expect too much. He is not so emotional, expecting an endless idyll. In any case, I'm not cut out for love in a cottage. I want the little luxuries of life . . . and I'm getting old, Frank. Thirty next year. The first little crow's feet, the first faint lines of elderly virginity, the premonition of becoming a poor relation living on a small allowance in a Kensington flat. I can't face the prospect. It's too deplorable. Anything's better than that. Even a rich husband with three Rolls-Royces and a yacht in the Mediterranean, and that very charming old house with every modern convenience behind its ancient beams, and quite a nice little mansion in Cadogan Square!"

"Excellent!" said Brandon. "I hope you will be happy."

"I shall get a lot of fun," she answered. "I don't expect happiness to the *n*th degree. Is there anybody you know who has attained that elusive sensation for more than five minutes now and then?"

He was sulky for a few minutes, and then something moved in his mind, and he knew that it was sheer impudence of him to be sulky. What right had he to disapprove? Pearl Jerningham had been good enough to talk to him, to laugh with him, to pass a few hours with him from time to time. It was his own fault if he had allowed himself to get excited about her. He ought to have been more on his guard.

"I hope you will be happy," he said again, without bitterness this time. "That man Chantry will have a very beautiful wife—it's absurd of you to talk of crow's feet and old age!—and you will have the world at your feet. Perhaps when you live in that old house you will pass down my lane sometimes and let me look at you from my cottage garden, very respectfully, pulling my forelock."

"I shall come inside your cottage," she said. "I shall interrupt your work. I shall help you to wash up after you have made tea for me. I shall ask you

to my garden parties."

"And I shan't come," said Brandon. "But I'll write a sonnet now and then to a lovely lady and fasten it with a tin-tack to this old tree where we used to sit."

Pearl Jerningham fluttered her eyelashes.

"I'll put one of your novels in every bedroom," she promised.

"Good heavens, that will be a whole edition!"

He took her back to the house on the green, and when she took his hand she drew it forward and put it to her lips, so that he was exceedingly embarrassed.

"I like our friendship," she said. "If you asked me I might almost be tempted to try love in a cottage!"

He stared at her for a moment, and his heart gave that lurch which had happened when he first saw her in her grandmother's drawing room framed in the French window with the rose garden as her background.

"Dare I ask you?" he said in a voice that was strangely harsh.

"I'm only joking!" she cried. "It's a shame to tease you. Good luck to the novel!"

She kissed her hand to him, and he raised his shabby old hat. What a fool he had been!

18

BRANDON had to face some weeks in his country cottage without his mother to look after his bodily comforts and mental ease. His sister—with that irresponsible husband who allowed his socialistic ideas to creep into his journalistic copy for Conservative papers—was going to have her new baby. Owing to irregularity of wages the maidservant had signified her intention of seeking a new position. Also, as she explained, she couldn't abide babies and monthly nurses. With this crisis approaching a top-floor flat overlooking Battersea Park, Mrs. Brandon felt bound to go to the rescue, despite her anxiety for an absent-minded son who depended upon her more than he was aware.

"I do hope you will be all right, Frank," she said at the breakfast table, before leaving him to the tender mercies of Mrs. Narracott.

"Perfectly all right," he assured her. "Besides, Val Foster is coming down to break the awful spell."

Mrs. Brandon looked doubtful. She knew Val Foster, and he did not inspire her with complete confidence.

"For goodness sake, don't get your feet wet—or if you do, don't forget to change your socks. And don't leave the candle burning. It's terribly dangerous in an old place like this. I've asked Mrs. Narracott to feed you up while I'm away. You will come in properly to your meals, won't you?"

Brandon laughed at all this anxiety. He had heard his mother talking long and earnestly to Mrs. Narracott, giving her final instructions for his safety and comfort, as though he were a small boy incapable of taking care of himself.

"My dear Mother, of course I shall miss you horribly, but I'm not quite as helpless as all that. Besides, I shall have Foster to give a helping hand. If there's any danger of starvation we can get a meal at the Jolly Farmer."

She had one more warning to give him, and she avoided his eyes as she said it.

"Don't let those Avenel girls plague you. Or any other siren of Surrey. They all want to waste your time."

Brandon coloured up slightly. It was an indirect reference to certain emotions which he was trying to forget.

"You needn't worry about that," he said carelessly. "I'm going to write some short stories before you get back. And I shall have Foster's company."

But he knew that she had a secret anxiety lest he should be lured away by some designing female in her absence. Not even Pearl Jerningham's engagement to Cyril Chantry had made her quite sure that he was out of danger.

He gave her an envelope which he had not sealed down.

"Give that to Lucy with my love. It may come in useful now that her ridiculous husband is out of a job again."

His mother drew out a check and glanced at it.

"Oh, Frank! It's terribly generous of you. But you can't afford all that. Twenty pounds!"

"I can just spare it," he said. "It won't go very far, anyhow."

He could just spare it, though it meant giving up a holiday which he had been scheming to take, now that he had finished his novel. A tramp through Brittany with Val Foster. He had been turning up guide books—St. Malo—

Vannes—Carnac. For thirty francs a day they could stay very comfortably in these places. Now that little dream had been shattered by the failure of an irresponsible brother-in-law to hold down a job and provide for his wife and overnumerous babies. Also he would have to cut down his weekly ration of tobacco. Well, that would be good for his health. He had been oversmoking lately, especially while he was correcting the proofs of his last novel, due for autumn publication.

His mother put her hand on his shoulder and kissed his cheek, though she was shy of emotional demonstration.

"It's very good of you, Frank. You work so hard and get such poor sales. I wish you didn't write above the heads of the public. It's unfair that novelists who pander to the lowest taste should get all the money. It's abominable, really, when you put more genius in a paragraph than they do in millions of words."

Brandon laughed at her. She had said such things many times before, and there was no truth in them.

"My dear Mother, I get exactly what I'm worth in the literary market. If I fail to please the big public it's because I haven't the knack of writing stuff which appeals to average human nature. It shows I'm limited. I've no illusions about that. If I could make a hundred thousand people read a book instead of a thousand at the most, I should begin to think I had a touch of genius. I've no sense of highbrow superiority. One writes to be read and, if possible, bought."

"No," said his mother. "You're too good to appeal to the mass mind."

He argued with her to pass the time until she was ready to go by bus to the station.

"I'm too narrow," he said. "Too unimaginative. I think the mass mind is much more intelligent than the critics allow. What about H. G. Wells? They devour him. He's the legitimate successor of Charles Dickens. The historian of modern life. What about Galsworthy? His *Forsyte Saga* was a best seller."

"Pooh!" she said. "None of them can write the beautiful things you do, Frank."

That was the absurdity of mother love. He knew his limitations, his desperate struggles to get anywhere near the truth of life as he knew it, the agony of construction at which he was a dreadful duffer, his lack of humour, his shirking of emotion, his deliberate avoidance of feminine interest.

At the station he lingered by the carriage door until the train started. His mother remembered one or two other things which she wished to impress upon him. If he went out when Mrs. Narracott was away—she was going to sleep with her sister as usual—he was to be sure to lock up. There were so many gipsies about. Then there was the oil for the lamps. She had only left enough for a week or two. He would have to order another gallon.

The guard whistled, and Brandon leaned through the window to kiss this little gray-haired woman who had looked after him with a devotion which he had hardly realized until now, when she was leaving him for a while. She had done everything for him while he had been absorbed in his work or had wandered about, chasing ideas, or living in his own thoughts, or allowing himself to fall in love. He would feel extraordinarily lost without her—absurdly helpless. She sat there smiling at him and coughing now and then with her usual touch of bronchitis, anxious, shabby, worn, and frail looking. She would probably tire herself out looking after Lucy and her babies. He was conscience-stricken because of the way he had let her wait on him, and the long hours he had left her alone, cut off from all her real interests in life—except himself.

"You'll be glad to hear the roar of buses again and see the look of London chimney pots," he said.

"Well, it will be nice to see a few shop windows," she admitted. "But I shall be glad to get back."

He raised his hand to her as the train went off, and saw a glint of tears in her eyes, although she was smiling.

It was the first time she had been away from him for years, except for a night or two, though he had left her for his trips abroad. For her sake he was sorry that his literary earnings were so precarious. It would be fine to give her a good time now and then, to take her away to the Riviera or somewhere during the winter months when her bronchitis was bad as a rule. She hadn't had a good time away from drudgery and domestic care ever since he could remember. Just for a moment he envied those best sellers whose novels sold like hot cakes.

19

Mrs. Narracott, who cooked and cleaned at Willowbrook and slept out with her sister in the village, is a valuable witness of what happens when an

author and an artist live together in a country cottage. At least, her point of view is worth considering, because it represents the reasonable opinion of simple souls about those extraordinarily unpractical and disorderly people who are more interested in words and ideas, and blobs of wet paint, and the relation of art to life, than in the decent ordering of their own lives.

As she told her sister, Mrs. Mew, the two gentlemen were a great "trial." She couldn't do anything with them, try as she would. Just as she was preparing a nice hot lunch for them, they announced that they would be out all day and wanted her to make up a few sandwiches. Just as she had scrubbed and polished the boards in the sitting room, they came in with muddy boots—it was a wet autumn—and went clumping about the house, leaving a trail of dirty footmarks. From circumstantial evidence of candle ends, heaped-up ashes in the hearth, and the dead ends of cigarettes dropped into flower vases and teacups, she thought they sat up to the small hours of the morning, talking nonsense—the same kind of nonsense which she heard through the kitchen door sometimes.

They were always arguing, getting excited about nothing at all, shouting at each other sometimes as though they were quarrelling, although they seemed to be the best of friends. She couldn't get a word in edgewise unless she could get Mr. Brandon by himself. They made cocoa for themselves late at night, and there were signs that they had been going at the biscuits and cheese. One night they never went to bed at all. She was shocked when she came at half-past seven to find the two gentlemen sitting one each side of the hearthplace before a dead fire—still talking. It was something about God and Life and Art, as far as she could make out. The room was thick with smoke and strewn with matches. The lamps were burning dim, having used up most of their oil. Mr. Brandon looked like a ghost, with dark lines under his eyes. He sprang to his feet and cried out, "Holy Moses!" when she opened the door, and then laughed at Mr. Foster and accused him of being "a talkative devil."

Mr. Foster was a little mad, thought Mrs. Narracott. There was no knowing what he wouldn't do next, and there were some things which she was ashamed almost to tell her sister, although she was a married woman. Well, to be quite frank, he had a habit of going to his bath without a stitch on him. She met him like that in the bedroom passage and he said, "Nice morning, Mrs. Narracott!" as though he were fully dressed. Disgusting, she called it, though he didn't seem to mind. As for his pictures, she couldn't make head or tail of them. They would look just as well upside down. Trees that never grew in any field that she had seen, and she was country born and bred. Skies that looked as if he had flung his paints about when he was

vexed. But he seemed pleased with them himself. He would stand in front of them smoking his old pipe and saying, “That comes pretty well. I may say that’s pretty useful for a pavement artist.” Mr. Brandon seemed to like them too. He said, “That’s great, old man! That’s a giddy masterpiece! That would knock the R. A. stone dead”—whatever that might mean. One day when he had been out in the fields painting he came back very excited, crying, “A tragedy! A tragedy!” like an actor in a melodrama.

“Whatever’s the matter, sir?” asked Mrs. Narracott, quite startled.

“God help me!” he cried. “My greatest masterpiece. Destroyed. Totally obliterated. Gone!”

“What’s happened?” asked Mr. Brandon in his quiet way.

It was quite a time before Mr. Foster was able to explain. Then it appeared that he had left his painting in a field while he went to get a drink at the Jolly Farmer. When he came back he discovered that one of Farmer Birkett’s cows had licked all the paint off his canvas.

“And it’s my opinion,” said Mrs. Narracott when telling this story to her sister, “that Farmer Birkett’s cow will be as sick as a dog. It makes me retch even to look at his pictures, let alone swallow them.”

Then the two gentlemen laughed fit to kill themselves.

The two gentlemen were not without visitors. Miss Audrey came to call upon them in a way which she wouldn’t have done if Mrs. Brandon had been at home, in Mrs. Narracott’s private opinion. Miss Audrey joined in some of that talk that was going on, and from the kitchen Mrs. Narracott could hear her laughter—very merry and abandoned sometimes—when Mr. Foster was in one of his funny moods. She stayed to supper once or twice and helped Mrs. Narracott to wash up, just as if she was a servantmaid instead of being one of the Avenels; and after that Mr. Foster went up to the hall to paint Miss Audrey’s portrait, leaving Mr. Brandon to do some work. Then Mr. Jerningham came in sometimes, bringing his flute with him and playing it to Mr. Foster’s accompaniment on the piano, with a bottle of whisky on top of the piano lid in case he felt thirsty, which he did quite often. More talk, of course!

Mrs. Narracott could never understand why the gentry—if one could call these artists and writing men gentry—should have so much to say to each other. Mr. Jerningham, who was a real gentleman, was a great talker. Going in with a tray of glasses after supper, or to ask if anything more was wanted before she went home, Mrs. Narracott saw him standing with his back to the fireplace, speaking like a Member of Parliament before an election. She

overheard some of his words. England. . . . The Demoralization of the Working Classes. . . . Breeding from the Unfit. . . . The Need of Aristocracy . . . the Old Peasant Stock.

Very handsome and very wicked he looked, with his black eyebrows and long, lean face. There were many stories about him in the village by people who remembered him as a wild young man. There was that story about Phyllis Chant, the blacksmith's daughter, now respectably married with two children as old as Miss Audrey. Mrs. Narracott herself remembered the time when he was still living in the old house, now turned into a hotel for week-enders and golfing people. She remembered that he tried to kiss her when she was nursemaid to Mrs. Avenel twenty years ago. She had smacked his face for him properly, being a respectable girl and walking out with Narracott at the time. Perhaps he hadn't forgotten, because he always smiled at her under his black brows and said, "Hullo, Polly! Glad to see you again. Keeping well?"

Then one evening Miss Pearl Jerningham came in with Mr. Cyril Chantry of Yeoman's Farm—the rich city gentleman who had killed his wife by cruelty, if one could believe half one heard. Miss Pearl laughed very much with Mr. Foster, but Mr. Brandon seemed upset and was very quiet.

"It's my belief, my dear," said Mrs. Narracott to her married sister, "that young Brandon was a bit gone on Miss Pearl before she got engaged to that man up at Yeoman's. You know how things get about in a village like this, though I can't think why. The boy who looks after Birkett's cattle saw them sitting together on stiles and things during harvest time. And he was very peaky in his appetite, I noticed. His poor Ma was worried about him. One does put two and two together, you know."

Seen from the mental view of Mrs. Narracott, life in Willowbrook Cottage during the absence of Mrs. Brandon was disorderly and upsetting. What annoyed her most, perhaps, was the difficulty of getting a word in edgewise.

20

Val Foster enjoyed those talks and walks with Brandon, and it amused him to see behind a shy man's mask, dropped now and then in moments of self-revelation, and sometimes, when not on his guard, utterly discarded, so that Foster could see the workings of his mind.

Foster's own method of argument, partly for the sake of humorous effects, was one of brutal assertion. Brandon modified, excused, saw half-tones and delicate shades, and found it extraordinarily difficult to hate or blame. Foster once before had accused him of disgusting sympathy. He did so again in this country cottage when he saw how Brandon listened with an air of extreme attention to Mrs. Narracott's meanderings about her rheumatism, the trials of her unfortunate sister, married to a man who drank up his wages, and the symptoms of a small niece who was sickening, she thought, for measles.

"My good ass," said Foster, "why do you allow your precious time to be wasted by that old chatterbox? What does it matter to you whether she has lumbago in her backside or whether her sister's husband drowns himself in weak ale at the Jolly Farmer?"

"It matters a lot to her," said Brandon. "And after all, we owe her something for cooking our grub."

"What you owe you pay," argued Foster. "These talkative old women would worry your life out if you listened to all their ailments. Tell the old lady to dry up."

"She's quite interesting," said Brandon. "I like to know how people live in the village. I like to get at their point of view."

"It's not worth getting," asserted Foster in his dogmatic way. "They're simply out to bleed the moneyed folk for all they're worth, and don't show any gratitude for benefits received. I know 'em! I have a sister married to a man in Sussex. The country folk batten on them. The head gardener sells his vegetables. The grocer charges him fancy prices. His servants get secret commissions from the tradespeople, and when they've fattened on him they give notice because they're too far away from the local cinema. He has to subscribe to the cricket clubs and the football clubs and every blessed thing, while paying high wages to young louts who get their so-called education free, slack off when they feel tired, and go on the dole when they get the sack for insolence or incompetence."

"Human nature isn't as bad as all that," said Brandon. "I find the folk about here very honest and good hearted."

"That's because they can't get anything out of you. Those shop people in the village are much more prosperous than a writing Johnny. They all have their side cars or their motor bikes, while you trudge about on your flat feet."

“I like trudging about on my flat feet,” said Brandon. “Let’s go for that walk.”

During the walk he was stopped by a straight-backed old lady who peered into his face and caught hold of his sleeve.

“Haven’t I seen you before, young man?” she asked.

“I came to tea with your granddaughter,” said Brandon, shouting at her.

“Oh, you’re one of Pearl’s young men!” she exclaimed. “She always has someone after her. Keeps them on a string, the puss, and plays cat-and-mouse with them. Who is that attractive-looking man with you? He reminds me uncommonly of my old friend the Bishop of Exeter.”

Foster tried to suppress unseemly mirth at being taken for a bishop and managed to pull himself together sufficiently to make his bow to the old lady when Brandon introduced him. But he became impatient at the end of a quarter of an hour when Brandon was still listening patiently to a long account of the late Bishop’s eccentricities, interrupted by the old lady’s difficulties in remembering where they happened, and when they happened, and the name of the niece who kept house for him.

“I’m almost positive it was Miss Smith. And yet I have a feeling that it was Miss Montefiore. Surely you remember, my dear?”

“Perhaps it was Miss Hermione Sheepshanks,” suggested Foster helpfully.

The old lady thought it might have been, but on the other hand she had an idea it was Miss Johnson.

Foster rescued Brandon at last by protesting that he had to send off a telegram, and Mrs. Jerningham released them graciously, after warning them with a playful finger not to get into trouble with the girls, whom she called “gals.”

“I know you young men. I remember my brothers. Dreadful philanderers with anything in a skirt! Now there are no skirts, but I daresay it’s just the same.”

“Heaven help us!” exclaimed Val Foster after this interruption. “How long would you have talked to that old dame if I hadn’t broken in brutally? She’s worse than Mrs. Narracott.”

“I’m sorry for old people,” said Brandon. “They’re so lonely and bewildered. They don’t quite know whether they’re in the past or the present. One day you and I will be like that, forgetting what happened an hour ago and remembering the day before yesterday of sixty years ago.”

"I can well imagine you," said Foster, "trying to tell stories about the Great War to grandchildren who don't know what war it was, having skipped that chapter in their history books."

He gave a very good suggestion of Brandon as a doddering old man saying, "When I was on the Somme," in a high and wheezy voice.

"No chance of that," said Brandon, after good-humoured laughter. "I shan't have any grandchildren." He gave something like a sigh and made an irrelevant remark.

"By the way, that old dame is the grandmother of Pearl Jerningham. You met her, didn't you, on the Riviera?"

It was the first time he had mentioned Miss Jerningham to Foster. Some shyness or inhibition had always held back any reference to her acquaintance with this humorous friend.

"What, the woman who wrecked my life?" exclaimed Foster. "That heartless lady who left me with a bleeding heart in a tramcar between Mentone and Monte Carlo? Now I come to think of it, she does live in these parts."

Brandon mentioned casually—too casually, thought Foster—that he had met her several times.

"She's engaged to the man who owns that old farmstead I showed you the other day. Cyril Chantry."

"Serve him right!" said Foster. "She'll spend his money and then accuse him of being a vulgarian and one of the New Rich. I know that laughing lady. She's as selfish as a Persian kitten and as heartless as a mocking bird."

Brandon glanced at him with a slightly heightened colour.

"I don't think you ought to say things like that, old man, even as a licensed jester. She's charming."

Val Foster didn't stand that sort of talk from his best friend, and he had a dark suspicion which he immediately tried to verify by his usual methods.

"My poor dreamer! My young and innocent friend. Don't tell me that you have fallen a victim to that girl's seductions! Has she been amusing herself with you on a summer holiday? Great heavens, that woman ought to be locked up!"

It was one of those moments when Brandon gave himself away completely.

"I don't mind telling you," he said huskily, "that I've made a hopeless fool of myself, old man. I've had the damned impudence to fall in love with

her."

Val Foster felt sorry for him, but didn't say so. He argued for a little while that Brandon had a perfect right to fall in love with anybody, and that it would do him a lot of good as an emotional experience, and that it was an honour to any woman to be loved by a man who wrote good grammar and had a little white flame in his soul.

"Speaking seriously," said Brandon, "I've taken a pretty hard knock, though I'm not going to wail about it."

He asked Foster not to talk about it, and the two friends trudged for half an hour through Surrey woods. Then Brandon spoke of the Avenel girls and the lack of suitable young men in the neighbourhood, and he talked as though continuing his private thoughts.

"The point is, what about this love business? We don't seem to get any nearer to the solution of that particular problem. After a thousand years of so-called civilization, the relationship between the sexes seems to be more difficult than ever. Everybody is talking about it, writing about it, thinking about it, but they don't seem to make a success of it. I dodged it for some years. It's like trying to dodge a forest fire when one's passions get stirred. The best one can do, I suppose, is to hang on to self-control, which is another name sometimes for self-crucifixion."

Val Foster was interested and amused and amazed. So this celibate soul had been caught at last by the inescapable passion. He had run away from women of the town and then had met one face to face in a country lane. He had gone into Surrey to save his soul and had lost his heart to the wrong girl.

"My dear fellow," said Val Foster, "what's wrong is the preposterous myth of romantic love which still lingers in your sentimental mind. It has been the curse of the Western world, but fortunately its evil spell is passing at last, owing to cheap little textbooks of biology and the realism of the modern mind, which doesn't seem to have touched your particular brain cells. You look into a certain lady's eyes, feel your pulse flutter in a strange and pleasurable way, and straightway imagine that she is the one woman in the whole world who is any good to you. That old stuff about twin souls as written by Ouida and Mrs. Humphry Ward and the Victorian novelists! That detestable hypocrisy written in innumerable sonnets by Elizabethan poets who professed undying love for some beauty of the court while they kissed any pretty slut in the wine taverns where they scrawled their verses.

"Romantic love was an illusion invented by dissolute courtiers in Italy and France. It became a European conspiracy for keeping women faithful to unfaithful husbands. Believe me, Brandon old dear, that for mating purposes

one woman is as good as another, provided she is not too revoltingly ugly and conforms to the usual code of manners. All you've got to do to make a happy marriage—or a marriage with the usual causes of domestic trouble—is to go out to the nearest main road, raise your hand to the next baby Austin, accost the girl inside and say, 'Hi, you, come and be married! I'm in love with you. I have a cottage with old beams and four mouse traps. Now, pack up a handbag and don't keep me waiting.' As for self-crucifixion, I'm aghast. Why crucify yourself? Why deny your natural instincts? Isn't self-expression the order of the day? Haven't we liberated ourselves from the old tyrannies and taboos?"

"No," said Brandon. "You know damn well that we haven't, you humbug! And you know that if we did we should go to pieces. There must be some kind of social discipline. Sex must be guarded by taboos or we shall get back to the animal state. All this talk about self-expression is another name for anarchy. I believe in order. Also I believe in the love of one man for one woman. Anything less than that is a degradation of love and the denial of an ideal to which we owe a great deal in art, literature, and social chivalry."

"The man is mediæval!" said Val Foster, addressing a thoughtful-looking cow over a wayside hedge. "The man lives aloof from the stream of modern thought!"

The argument lasted a long time. It led up to that general discussion of life which was interrupted by Mrs. Narracott at half-past seven the following morning.

21

Foster fulfilled his promise to paint Audrey Avenel, although he left out the cornfield and the mangel-wurzels. He painted her in her father's old house, with a casement window behind her and a glimpse of the rose garden. He talked a lot of nonsense to her, which kept her laughing, but sometimes they talked seriously, because this painter had his serious moments, though they didn't last long. It was natural that they should talk of Brandon, their mutual friend, and being a man who studied the minds as well as the faces of those who sat to him—some of his critics deny that he ever painted a human face—he guessed that this attractive girl had a sentimental affection for an impecunious novelist who was totally unaware of his luck.

It was not difficult to arrive at this conviction. If Foster spoke about a novel he had read, Audrey Avenel asked him what he thought of Brandon's books. If he discussed the relative values of town and country life, Audrey Avenel wondered if Brandon had been wise to bury himself in a country cottage out of touch with humanity. If he asked her about any interesting people living in the district, she thought that the only man who had anything resembling a soul was Mr. Brandon.

"I'm so sorry for him," she exclaimed one day. "He's so desperately poor."

"He likes being poor," said Val Foster. "He would be conscience-stricken if he earned more than a journeyman labourer. He's like that. One of those hopeless idiots who think that if they're enjoying life they're probably robbing other people of their fair share of happiness. Not my style, you know! I believe in grabbing what one can and letting the other fellow rot, if he can't ripen. That's the law of life. That is what has built up our magnificent civilization and that great Empire upon which the sun absolutely refuses to set."

Audrey Avenel laughed, as she did almost too much when this portrait was in progress.

"You don't seem to have grabbed very much," she remarked, glancing at his paint-stained clothes.

Foster spoke in the tone of a tragic actor.

"Madam, I have been rich and I have been poor. I have earned as much as twenty pounds for the portrait of a mayor in the Midlands in his chain of office. I spent it in riotous living which I don't regret. I have battened on the fleshpots of my friends. I have known squalor, and I have known luxury. I prefer luxury, and one day when I am President of the Royal Academy, I shall decline to eat off anything but gold plate. This is a charming room. I suppose your father wouldn't like to adopt a poor artist to decorate his walls and paint frescoes in his bathrooms? Any style required."

"My father can hardly support his own family," explained Audrey. "This house is an inheritance of a more prosperous past. The income tax is dragging us down to ruin."

"Strange!" said Val Foster. "I have never earned enough to interest the Inland Revenue Department. I should feel that I was being dragged up to wealth if I began to worry about the income tax."

Audrey Avenel spoke of Brandon again.

"Do you think he will ever make a success of his books?"

"Not the least chance," said Foster. "He's too pure. He's too old-fashioned. The ladies at the libraries search in vain for any naughtiness."

Audrey Avenel was thoughtful, while Foster looked into her eyes to see their colour.

"Supposing he fell in love one day?" she asked presently. "Wouldn't it be rather a tragedy? I mean, he couldn't very well keep a wife on his present income, could he? Especially with his mother to look after."

"It would depend on the wife," said Foster. "It would be quite all right if she did the cooking and made the beds and emptied the slops and mended his socks and nursed his babies and made herself scarce when he was in the throes of inspiration."

"Why not?" asked Audrey Avenel, heiress to five hundred years of cultured tradition and sheltered life. "What better than to be the squaw of the man one loves?"

Val Foster was somewhat staggered. It didn't seem typical of modern girlhood. Such ideas weren't in character, he thought, with a daughter of this house with its panelled walls and antique furniture. He made an amiable and tentative inquiry.

"I suppose I haven't known you long enough to suggest life with a poor artist in need of a faithful squaw? But I've a very good studio with all modern conveniences, including an oil stove. There's a cinema round the corner, if you happened to get bored with me. My annual income varies from nothing to three hundred when business is brisk."

Audrey Avenel thanked him kindly. It seemed to her a good offer, other things considered.

"Think it over," said Val Foster, doing some fancy work with a camel-hair brush. "I'm quite serious."

She always laughed most when he pretended to be quite serious, and she did not know that at the back of his head was the thought that an artist's life would be considerably improved by the comradeship of a girl like this, and that he felt slightly annoyed with his friend Brandon because she seemed to like him so much—that serious fellow who wouldn't know how to make her laugh half as much as he would. But, in any case, there was no sense in such ideas. Like Brandon, he was sentenced to celibacy by the law of economics, which condemns the artist or the writer to unholy poverty unless he learns some trick of pleasing the mob or has a genius which is marketable.

Road sweepers earn a steadier income. Like Brandon, he obeyed the rules of the social code—the old-fashioned moralities—in spite of his talk

about self-expression. He was as respectable as most of the other inhabitants of Chelsea and Maida Vale—too busy and too ill paid to make experiments in disorderly life, whatever views they express under the mental stimulus of weak tea, or strong coffee, and Gold Flake cigarettes. It was only in the romantic days of the early Victorian period that a long-haired artist would think of eloping with the daughter of a Colonel Avenel and drive her in a postchaise to ill furnished rooms in Bloomsbury, knowing full well that Avenel père would hurry after them and come down with the cash. Blackmail, really! That Victorian romanticism was merely a mask for sordid selfishness, thought Foster. Nowadays people are too decent for that kind of pose. And in any case, Avenel père couldn't be blackmailed. The income-tax authorities had seen to that.

So his thoughts roved as he painted this portrait of Audrey and enjoyed himself because it was coming very well and looked quite a little like her, with that rather jolly glimpse of the rose garden through the casement window.

The Avenel family crowded round at times to see how it was getting on. That was a nuisance to the man with the brush, because family criticism is always severe. Mr. Richard Avenel junior sauntered in and made some remarks.

"My hat, I didn't realize your nose was as snub as all that, Audrey! I must say Mr. Foster has caught your expression all right. Shy and at the same time bold. Intelligent and yet innocent. But isn't that ear a bit on the off side? I mean, doesn't it bulge a bit at the lobe? Excuse my criticism, won't you, sir?"

"No, I'll be hanged if I will," said Foster, who was not in the habit of standing nonsense from undergraduates of Cambridge nor yet of Oxford. "That ear is precisely as I intended it to be, and if you're not very careful you'll get a thick ear of your own, my dear lad. I'm warning you."

Young Avenel laughed loudly. He hadn't been spoken to like that since he was a fag at Winchester. He regarded Val Foster as a great humorist.

Sylvia, so slim and dark as a contrast to her Saxon sister, also permitted herself a little destructive criticism.

She glanced at Val Foster as though wondering whether he could stand the deadly truth.

"Don't you think you have made her look rather like a barmaid with peroxided hair? You don't seem to give her that air of refinement which we expect from our distinguished sister."

"Sylvia, you ought to be whipped!" cried Audrey. "I'll rub your nose in Mr. Foster's palette if you're not careful."

"If you people will give me a little air," said Foster, "I'll get on with this slab of work. What if she does look like a barmaid? There are some nice barmaids, let me tell you, and I have a high respect for them. There's more intelligence behind a bar in a Chelsea pub than there is in some old Surrey mansions, if you'll allow me to say so."

This remark, spoken with grim rebuke, was received with a riot of laughter from Sylvia and pleased young Avenel extremely.

Mrs. Avenel may have concealed any secret criticism which was almost unavoidable to a mother's heart in the presence of a portrait of her daughter, but she expressed great admiration for a very charming "likeness," as though Foster had done a coloured photograph. But it was Colonel Avenel who paid Foster the best compliment. Every now and again he came to see how the work was progressing, and stayed sometimes to smoke a cigarette, watching Foster with an expression of amused admiration. Then one morning he suggested a walk in the garden before lunch and seemed to have something on his mind.

"Your antirrhinums are perfectly marvellous, sir!" said Foster, who liked to adapt his conversation to the mentality of his company.

Colonel Avenel smiled courteously.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "they're godetias. Not that it matters."

He talked a little about the weather—the trees hadn't turned much yet—and then broached a subject which seemed to him delicate.

"Excuse me discussing a little matter of business, but may I venture to ask how much you want for that admirable portrait of my daughter Audrey?"

Val Foster laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"Nothing at all, Colonel. I'm doing it to keep my hand in. It will be a pleasure to see it hanging on these walls, if you think it good enough. Perhaps you will let me send it to an exhibition or two."

Colonel Avenel was silent for a few moments.

"My dear young man," he said, "that's far too generous. I've never heard of such a thing. The labourer is worthy of his hire."

That last phrase seemed to strike him as not quite tactful or polite.

"That's a crude way of putting it, but you know what I mean. If you would name a price I would see if I could afford it by selling a bit of land or

something."

Val Foster laughed loudly.

"My dear Colonel, you embarrass me! My portrait of your daughter is not worth one of your meadows, though I should like to think so. A bit of England for one of my daubs? That would be a great story in Chelsea and Maida Vale!"

Colonel Avenel hesitated and then suggested a fair offer.

"If you would accept sixty pounds? It's as much as I can afford these days."

Val Foster made a noble gesture. Sixty pounds seemed like a fortune to him, but he valued his pride even more. Perhaps that was why he was a poor man, though envied by his fellow craftsmen.

"I promised your daughter I would paint her portrait. It wasn't a commercial offer, Colonel. Allow me to behave as if I were a little gentleman for once. The vanity of a pavement artist!"

Colonel Avenel took his arm and held it in a tight grip for a moment.

"It's extraordinarily good of you. I'm very much touched. If everybody in England had the same spirit I shouldn't be so anxious for its future. People nowadays take more than they give."

He spoke a word or two about Brandon.

"Nice fellow. It's a pleasure to have him as a neighbour."

He took Foster to his garden gate and was amused when the artist gave him a military salute in the old style. Foster had been one of those subalterns who had cursed brigadiers, generals, and staff officers with exceeding violence of language in many dugouts and rat-haunted billets in a war which is now ancient history. It struck him as ironical that he should be received on level terms with one of them in his own garden, and that his old bitterness had changed into tolerance for a type which perhaps was passing out of English life.

"After all," he said to Brandon, who was waiting for him, "the retired colonels who infest this neighbourhood have a quality which is not being reproduced by some of the younger crowd—if old Avenel is a fair specimen. What is it that makes them different from the cynical young gentlemen they send to Oxford at great expense?"

"Faith in an old code of manners and morals," said Brandon. "But I don't blame the younger crowd for challenging it all. It's the age of bewilderment. Freud and Einstein have undermined the foundations of

belief. The tribal laws are disintegrating. We haven't found the right balance between liberty and discipline. . . . By the way, Mrs. Narracott would be much obliged if you wouldn't use the sink for cleaning your brushes. I hope you don't mind my passing on her objection?"

"Not in the least," said Foster. He used the bath instead of the sink.

22

It was not far from Yeoman's Farm that Val Foster met the lady with whom he had once gone wandering to hilltop villages behind Mentone on the Côte d'Azur. He had left Brandon to do his weekly article for a Northern syndicate and decided on a lone tramp, now interrupted by this encounter.

"Fancy meeting you in a Surrey lane!" she cried, pretending to look surprised, although she had heard of his arrival from the Avenels.

She held her hand out for him to kiss as she had done on the Italian-speaking Riviera, and he was good enough to oblige, though he looked at her with mock severity.

"You're a beauty, you are!" he said, holding her hand rather longer than was necessary.

"Other people have told me so," she assured him. "But why mention it so grimly?"

"I have a friend," he said, "a very simple and honest man, chaste in soul and of most excellent simplicity. Why did you invade his hermitage and tempt him from his typewriter? Do you gloat over the bleeding hearts of your victims, massacred to make a midsummer holiday?"

A wave of colour swept Pearl Jerningham's face, but she laughed at the absurdity of Foster's speech.

"Do be sensible for once!" she implored. "This isn't a *pension* at Mentone!"

"Well, speaking seriously," said Foster, "you've been flirting with my friend Brandon, and he thought you were kind and fell in love with you."

For a moment she avoided his eyes, while the colour stayed in her cheeks.

"I know. Poor dear! I'm very sorry. I didn't mean to tease him."

"He's too good to be made a pretty lady's plaything," said Foster. "I don't object to your breaking my heart now and then, because I can drown my sorrows in drink, but I must ask you to keep off my more respectable friends."

"Is he really worrying about me?" asked Pearl Jerningham.

"He has all the symptoms of romantic love," said Foster. "It's painful to stay with him. His sighs make a draught in his drawing room. He pecks at his food. He paces his floor boards and makes them creak horribly at nights."

"Seriously," said Pearl, "does he pine for me?"

"The woman *does* gloat!" exclaimed Foster. "Oh, horrible!"

"Tell him I love him," said Pearl.

She laughed in her pleasing way and glanced back at the high gables of Yeoman's Farm.

"I suppose you know I'm engaged to the master of that house?"

"I hope he'll beat you," said Foster. "I hope there'll be a performance of *The Taming of the Shrew* in Surrey."

"It may be *Love's Labour Lost*," she answered. "But he's very kind. Look!"

She held out her hand to show him her engagement ring, and he pretended to be dazzled.

"Vulgar!" he told her. "That would keep me for a year with lots of beer."

"What about a stroll?" she suggested. "I like to keep slim."

"On condition there's no vamping," said Foster sternly. "I'm a strong man, but I'm easily tempted."

They strolled to the high woods above Yeoman's Farm, getting bare now in the autumn winds, with a soft carpet of crinkled beech leaves of russet and gold.

"Wonderful colour, this," said Foster. "I shall have to bring a canvas up here and have a slosh at it. It's the kind of thing the R. A. would hang on the line."

Pearl Jerningham spoke of his portrait of Audrey Avenel. She thought it was wonderful. She had taken Cyril to see it, and he was vastly impressed.

"Who is Cyril?" asked Foster, cudgelling his brain.

"My future husband, Cyril Chantry."

“Oh, Lord, yes! The great financier. I know some of his friends. Most unpleasant.”

Pearl Jerningham laughed and did not defend her future husband’s friends. She had met some of them.

“He’s keen for you to paint me,” she told him. “He thinks if you could do me as well as you did Audrey he would be glad to hang it over a dining-room table in Cadogan Square.”

“Very kind of him. How much does he propose to pay?”

“Name your own price,” said Pearl royally. “Cyril can afford it.”

Val Foster looked up into a sky still blue in late autumn. Whether he was looking for inspiration or said a little prayer this history cannot record.

“How about a hundred pounds?” he asked in a casual voice.

“Oh, that’s too cheap,” said Pearl Jerningham. “I wouldn’t be painted for a hundred pounds. I’m worth more than that in a gold frame. Say two hundred.”

“Certainly,” said Foster. “I say two hundred.”

He made a moral protest some moments later.

“Look here, young woman, I don’t think you ought to be so free with your future husband’s money. Honour bright, I hate to see a man dragged down to ruin quite so quickly. Give him time.”

Pearl Jerningham shrugged her pretty shoulders.

“Money means nothing to him. When he wants more he starts another company. I don’t understand these things, but that’s what Father tells me.”

“His friends tell me the same thing,” agreed Foster. “It’s quite all right until the revolution begins. Then you may have your little white throat cut while I’m defending your husband’s property behind a barricade. If I weren’t such a man of principle I might be on the wrong side of the barricade with a red rag on my rifle. It’s probably due to my ductless glands —according to a little book I read the other day—that I’m on the side of law and order and high finance.”

“You go too far for me,” said Pearl Jerningham. “I can’t follow that thread of argument.”

“It leads down Sinister Street,” he told her, “past your future husband’s head office.”

“Do you regard him as one of our more important bandits?” asked Pearl.

Foster nodded.

"One of the worst, my dear. So I'm told by his friends. There'll be a Bluebeard's Chamber in your bedroom."

Pearl Jerningham shrugged her shoulders.

"I shan't look inside as long as he's kind to me. I feel rather sorry for him. You'll be surprised to hear that he has a soul and is sorry that he didn't take up art instead of finance. He hates money-making, really. It's only that he plays the game as he finds it. He makes an adventure of it. He gets a kind of thrill out of it. But he loathes its drudgery and its shady corridors."

"I don't like that bit about art," said Foster. "It doesn't sound convincing. Not that I shall tell him so if he comes down with a check for two hundred pounds duly honoured at the bank. When shall I start that libel on you?"

He started it the next day at the Georgian house on the green, where Brandon had seen Pearl Jerningham framed in the French window and his heart had given a lurch. The portrait will be remembered by people who remember such things. It was in last year's Academy.

23

BRANDON and his friend were sitting over a log fire one evening, silent for once because a famous pianist was playing to them over the wireless, when there was a sound of footsteps coming up the garden path, and a moment later a knock at the door. It was eleven o'clock and too late for ordinary visitors. Brandon sat up and took notice, raising his eyebrows at Val Foster.

"I wonder who that is?"

"Perfectly easy to find out," said Foster. "Open the door, laddy."

Brandon went to the hall door and opened it, letting in a gust of wet wind and Sylvia Avenel.

She was wearing a leather motoring coat strapped tightly round her slim body, and a hat pressed down over her forehead so that it reached her eyes, shining and a little excited.

"Anything wrong?" asked Brandon, shutting the door to keep out the rain and the wind.

"Well," said Sylvia, "I've come to ask a favour. Will you be terribly kind?"

"Come in," suggested Brandon. "It's warmer by the fire. There's only Val Foster."

He wondered what kindness this girl wanted from him at that hour of the night. He had an uneasy feeling that it was something to do with the owner of a green car. And he was perfectly right.

"No, I won't come in. As a matter of fact, I have a man outside. I was supposed to be dining with my aunt in Brompton Square before coming home in the baby Austin by ten o'clock sharp according to parental orders."

"Only an hour late," said Brandon, smiling at this daughter of the Avenels.

She answered his smile rather nervously.

"Yes, but that's not the worst of it. I brought Robin with me for company's sake, and the idea was that he would put up for the night with a friend at Godalming. Unfortunately, I wrecked my car in a ditch not far from home, and the last bus has gone to Godalming, and it's pouring with rain, and Robin is in evening dress. The point is, will you put him up for the night?"

"Where is he now?" asked Brandon.

"Getting wet outside your gate," she told him, with a laugh in which amusement was mingled with anxiety.

"Well, we had better get him under cover," said Brandon.

He opened the door again, and Sylvia Avenel cried, "Robin!"

Through the darkness a young man appeared, and Brandon recognized him as the owner of the green car whom he had seen on summer evenings now and then on Harley Heath.

"Good-evening," the young man said politely. "Rather damp, isn't it?"

He was more than damp, and the light coat over his evening clothes looked decidedly wet.

"Come in and dry yourself," said Brandon not too warmly. He wasn't at all sure that he liked this situation. Sylvia Avenel was asking him to put up a man who had been ordered off the course by her father, after an evening in town when she was supposed to be dining with her aunt and was certainly not. It might lead to unpleasant friction with Colonel Avenel, for whom he had considerable esteem.

"You had better be introduced," said Sylvia, as though she were a model of social etiquette. "Mr. Robert Carling . . . Mr. Francis Brandon."

In the sitting room where Val Foster had been lounging before a log fire he was now standing and listening to these voices, after turning off the wireless and cutting off a Chopin prelude played by a famous pianist.

"Hello, young fellow!" he said when Mr. Robert Carling came into the room with Sylvia and Brandon. "Quite a time since you touched me for a quid in the King's Road. And, by the by, I don't think you ever paid it back. How's Jill?"

The young man in evening clothes—Mr. Robert Carling—looked staggered for a moment, or at least extremely disconcerted. Brandon noticed that his face flushed at the sight of Foster and that he didn't seem overjoyed to see him.

"You here?" he exclaimed.

"Why not?" asked Val Foster.

Sylvia was as surprised as the man she had brought in.

"Do you two people know each other?" she asked.

"Too well," said Foster. "There's hardly anything I don't know about Mr. Robert Carling. We had the same grandmother, I believe, and we went to the same elementary school—Harrow. Being eight years his senior, I used to punch his head when he was a small, unpleasant boy."

"Well, you needn't make a song about it," said the victim of Foster brutality.

He was a good-looking young man with fair hair which was very kinky, and pale-blue eyes which looked a little weak, and the faint touch of a golden moustache, like the hero of a sentimental novel.

Sylvia described her accident with the small car. The roads were wet, and she had had a bad skid when turning the corner of the lane which led to the main Godalming road. The beastly little mouse trap had lurched into the ditch and broken its steering gear, with other regrettable damage.

"There it will have to stay until the morning," she said. "Meanwhile I'm wet to the knees and stung with nettles in every part of my body. And I think I'm going to catch a cold unless some kind friend will get me some hot drink. What about you, Robin? That evening shirt looks disastrous."

Brandon admitted that he could make some hot drink, but he suggested that Sylvia had better get home. Her people might be worried. He would walk back with her, and Mr. Carling could sleep in Mrs. Narracott's room upstairs, if he didn't mind primitive conditions.

Sylvia Avenel seemed disinclined to move from a warm hearthside.

"Oh, I may as well get hung for a sheep as a lamb," she said carelessly. "In any case, Father won't know I'm late. He goes to bed at half-past ten, and Mother is well trained. She expects me when I come."

"Some of you children ought to have been laid over your mother's knee more often," said Val Foster in his candid way. "As an old man in the thirties I have a great deal of sympathy with your poor parents. I don't mind your loose morals—it's the age of liberty—but I strongly object to your bad manners. Why should you inflict this anxiety upon the authors of your being?"

Sylvia laughed as he wagged his forefinger at her like a parson reproving a sinner. It was an hour before she felt thoroughly warmed after toasting herself at the log fire and drinking some of Brandon's hot cocoa, which she shared with young Carling, who smoked cigarettes incessantly and was still disconcerted by the presence of Val Foster, as Brandon could see by his furtive glances now and then at that humorist. It was just past midnight when there was another knock at the cottage door.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Foster. "This is like a melodrama at the Elephant and Castle. A knock at the door. The clock strikes twelve, or even thirteen. The wind howls like a tortured thing. Open the door, my lad. Don't stand there looking apprehensive."

Somebody else looked apprehensive when Brandon opened his cottage door and spoke with a man outside. It was Sylvia Avenel who heard her father's voice.

"Sorry to trouble you, Brandon. But I'm anxious about my girl Sylvia. A man has just come in with the news that her car is lying in a ditch half a mile away. No sign of Sylvia! I thought perhaps you would help me to make a search. Audrey and her brother are scouring the countryside. Probably she's in some cottage with a broken wrist or something. I hope it's nothing worse."

"She's here," said Brandon. "Quite unhurt. Her car had a skid."

Colonel Avenel was silent for a moment, and then spoke with considerable relief.

"Thank heaven for that. . . . But why didn't she come home and let us know? Her mother and I have been dreadfully anxious. There are too many of these infernal accidents."

Brandon paused. It was difficult to explain why Sylvia had not gone home an hour ago. He didn't want to give her away, but a lie did not come easily to his lips.

"She was very wet," he said. "She came in to dry herself."

Colonel Avenel did not accept the explanation. There was a note of suspicion in his voice, or at least a kind of doubtfulness.

"But her car was quite close to her own home. Nearer than this cottage. Why come here?"

Brandon was relieved of further embarrassment. Sylvia slipped out of the sitting room and put her hand on her father's arm.

"Oh, Father! I'm so sorry I worried you. I felt quite dazed after the car bumped into the ditch. And it was so dark and wet that I went up the wrong lane. Then I saw the light in this cottage and came in to get dry. Mr. Brandon has been terribly kind."

Miss Sylvia Avenel had a pretty imagination. The words fairly tripped off her tongue.

"Well, all's well that ends well," said Colonel Avenel. "Only for goodness' sake, Sylvia, don't come back from town so late at night. It's not right. It's not safe. And it's not decent. Your aunt ought to have known better. She ought to have packed you off hours ago. I shall talk to her seriously. But nobody pays the slightest attention to my wishes or commands."

He spoke harshly for a moment, with the rasp of a colonel on parade, and then his voice softened.

"I'm very glad you're not hurt, my dear. Let us say good-night to Mr. Brandon. I'm deeply obliged to him."

Sylvia held out her hand to Brandon.

"Thanks enormously," she said, looking into his eyes with the glint of a smile.

He held the door open until the Colonel and his daughter were beyond the garden gate. Through the darkness he saw Sylvia raise her hand to him while she called out another "good-night." Then he went back to his sitting room and wiped a little moisture from his forehead.

"I wouldn't dare to put such melodrama into one of my novels," he said.

Val Foster was standing with his back to the fire, looking down at young Carling, who was lighting another cigarette.

"Now, my blue-eyed boy," he said, "a little explanation seems to be necessary. What's the meaning of this romantic episode with a young lady in Surrey? How long have you known her? Are your intentions strictly honourable? And what am I going to tell Jill Mannering, with whom you

were having an impassioned affair when I last heard about you from your sorrowing mother?"

Young Carling shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"It's all off with Jill."

"Lucky Jill!" remarked Val Foster. "How about Gracie Leach?"

The fair-haired young man flushed with a slight self-consciousness.

"That's old history, Val. Why rake it up? In any case, may I suggest that it's no business of yours?"

Foster looked over at Brandon with an almost imperceptible wink.

"On the contrary, my child. It's very much my business. Knowing the iniquity of your private life, I wish to save an innocent young woman from being ruined by an impecunious and immoral youth. As your cousin, my own good name is at stake. My own honour and reputation."

"Rats!" said Mr. Robert Carling, familiarly known as "Robin." "Do you still go on talking like that?"

For a moment Val Foster looked annoyed at this insolence from a younger member of his family.

"None of your lip," he answered. "Don't forget you owe me that quid, which I've no doubt you spent on wine and women. And you might also remember that if Miss Avenel's father comes to me for a reference I shall have to tell him that your own father kicked you out of doors and that you earn two pounds a week as a motor salesman at Knightsbridge."

Young Carling dropped his cigarette into the wood fire and then took up the bellows to make a little flame among the charred wood.

"I shan't trouble you for a reference," he said. "Sylvia knows all about that. And she's ready to take the risk."

"What risk?" asked Foster blankly.

"A bed-sitting room over the garage," said young Carling calmly. "It's not too bad. One could make it look rather jolly with some new wall paper and a lick of paint. Lots of good people live in worse places. In fact, these garage rooms are quite fashionable."

Foster spoke across Carling's head to Brandon.

"What do you think of that? This young swine—my mother's sister's son—dares think that he can ask a daughter of the Avenels to share a stinking garage with him!"

"I admire his courage," said Brandon.

“It isn’t courage,” said Foster. “It’s the infernal selfishness of post-war youth. It’s irresponsibility. This blue-eyed boy can’t keep a job for more than three months. And he doesn’t know the meaning of money. He owes me a quid, for instance.”

Young Carling put his hand into his breast pocket, fingered a small notebook, and flicked over a pound note to Foster.

“That’s paid, anyhow,” he remarked. “Thanks for the loan. It was quite helpful in time of need.”

“Well, that takes the sting out of my wrath,” said Foster, eying the pound note which lay on the boards at his feet. “But it doesn’t spoil the truth of my argument. You had better take your Grecian nose out of this particular patch of Surrey, young Robin. It may get hurt if I happen to pass by. I didn’t punch your head hard enough when you were a nasty little schoolboy. You’ve got into trouble with two girls already. Don’t you come snooping around Miss Avenel, or I’ll tell her all about you.”

“There’s nothing she doesn’t know,” said the boy. “Jill worked in the same hat shop. That’s how I came to know her. They shared rooms together for a time.”

Foster was silenced for once and glanced over at Brandon again with raised eyebrows.

But Brandon could not resist an ironical remark.

“I thought you believed in self-expression, old man—the breaking of taboos and all that?”

Foster pulled himself together and put up a bluff.

“Certainly. But I draw the line at general promiscuity.”

Young Carling rose and yawned slightly, and looked tall and elegant under the low beams, in spite of his crumpled shirt front, damaged in a Surrey ditch.

“What about bed?” he asked.

Brandon lit a candle for him and showed him up to his room, where inevitably he bumped his head under the low doorway, in spite of a warning.

“It’s primitive,” said Brandon. “But you’ll find a washstand.”

Young Carling smiled as he looked round Mrs. Narracott’s room, where she slept if she did not go down to the village.

“Sorry to give you all this trouble,” he murmured.

"It's nothing," said Brandon. Then he went downstairs to the sitting room and laughed quietly as he shut the door.

"This cottage is becoming like a wayside inn. Runaway girls with their lovers. Fathers looking for their lost daughters. Good heavens, it's like a scene in a French farce."

"It's your disgusting sympathy again," said Foster. "Sylvia didn't take that young pup to the vicar's house, or to Cyril Chantry's fake farmstead, or to any other house or hovel in the immediate neighbourhood. No, she drew a bee line here, because she knew you wouldn't give her away. Youth and all that nonsense. Romantic love and all that bilge. They know you, my lad. They see it in your eyes. They play with you."

Brandon did not defend himself from this overworked accusation of sympathy and sentiment. It was a come-back for his remark about self-expression.

"What's the worst or the best about that fellow upstairs?" he asked.

Val Foster put on a new pipe, somewhat to Brandon's alarm, because of the late hour. He was feeling the need of sleep since Foster's visit began.

"I don't want to be too hard on him. He doesn't get on with his father, who's a parson at Walham Green and rather a stickler on the subject of ethics. Robin cut loose a year or two ago and went on the stage for a bit. Subordinate parts at the Old Vic, and precious poor pay. Of course the girls went after him. Did you notice the glint of gold on his upper lip? Irresistible to three girls out of four! He had an affair with Jill Mannering, a nice kid, who used to be a student at the Slade before somebody told her she couldn't draw a haystack."

"What do you mean by an affair?" asked Brandon.

Foster shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't ask me for a definition. These kids have a mysterious code of their own. They used to feed together every evening at the Blue Parrot. I found her in his rooms pretty often. I know as a fact they spent a week together at Dorking."

"Oh, Lord!" said Brandon.

Foster nodded.

"Mind you," he said, "I'm not saying that anything happened. That's the odd thing about these post-war kids. When I tackled him on the subject he said that I had a nasty mind and that I was a damn bad artist, anyhow."

Brandon lit two candles.

"Perhaps he was right," he said. "Perhaps you and I have nasty minds, old man."

He lured Foster to bed.

Soon after breakfast next morning, before Foster had come down, Mr. Robert Carling thanked Brandon again for his night's lodging, buttoned his overcoat over his evening clothes, and caught the bus to Guildford.

"My cousin Val is a bit of a humorist," he said before departing.

24

Mr. Geoffrey Jerningham, the father of Pearl, fell into the habit of dropping in at Willowbrook Cottage two or three evenings a week, to the annoyance of Brandon, who preferred his quiet talks with Foster and liked to put in an hour's writing before he turned in to bed, if he could overcome his friend's incurable distaste for reasonable hours.

Mr. Jerningham was quite candid in explaining the reason for his visits.

"It's a relief to escape from the old lady," he said, "and you young fellows are good enough to listen to my cynical philosophy with more intelligence than I find in some of my horticultural neighbours. Besides, now that Pearl is engaged to that fellow up at Yeoman's Farm—she's a lucky young woman!—I feel abandoned in my old age."

Brandon resented the use of his cottage as a clubhouse for lonely gentlemen, although he was respectful to the father of a laughing lady about whom he had been foolishly emotional. Always at the back of his mind was the writing man's instinct to get alone into a quiet room where he could creep back to his imaginary world and hold conversation with the children of his own brain, and shut the door against reality and intrusions and other people's egotism. Like a child kept from its toys and bidden to sit still and listen to grown-ups, he wanted to steal upstairs to play his own game of word building on a pad of white paper. Even Foster's company became rather a strain at times, after the first week, not because he tired of his unfailing humour, but because his friend kept him from that introspection which becomes like a secret vice to a writing man absorbed in his own ideas —a "dope" which he cannot do without for long periods. Yet he coerced himself to be polite to Pearl's father and to listen appreciatively to his stories of travel and adventure in Oriental countries—he had been a big-game

hunter as a young man—and to take part in the terrific arguments which arose between him and Val Foster on the state of England and other subjects.

Certainly he was an interesting study. It was worth while "listening-in" until he repeated himself and became just a little tedious, and revealed an egotism and a cynicism which were only relieved by his ironical humour. He was one of those odd types who still exist in England here and there in spite of the smoothing-out process of public-school education and the conventional manners of the social code. To Brandon, watching him as he stood with his back to the hearthside in a Surrey cottage, he seemed always a throw-back to the seventeenth century—a reincarnation of one of the Restoration rakes—with his long, lean face, and black eyebrows, and dark sunken eyes, and thin, humorous lips.

He stood for extreme individualism against the socialistic tendencies of the modern world, and for intellectual aristocracy against the advancing tide—the overwhelming tide—of the new democracy. Everything he said jarred against the instinctive beliefs of Brandon, who still clung to a sentimental faith in the democratic ideal and its claims to equality of opportunity and reward. He was antagonized by this man's arrogance and by the brutality of his opinions, and yet he was disturbed and weakened in his faith by an underlying truth, undeniable, or at least difficult to counter, in many of his views.

"The civilized world is walking on the way to perdition," he said one evening. "I see the end of civilization as it was built up by centuries of culture and tradition, jealously guarded by an intellectual aristocracy. What is happening now is the standardization of character and intelligence on a low grade of quality. Cheap goods, my dear young friends, human as well as manufactured! Shoddy brains as well as shoddy clothes! The mass-produced mind as well as the machine-made articles of mass production! How can it be otherwise when power has been handed over to the mob, and when the greatest number of votes decide the government of a country, the success of a book, the run of a play, or the circulation of a newspaper? You see, democracy inevitably drags down the soul of humanity to the lowest common denominator. It penetrates and lowers all standards of art, without which civilization is worthless."

Here he made a courteous gesture in the direction of Val Foster.

"It vitiates and poisons the spirit of literature."

Here he nodded to Brandon.

"All that is inevitable directly one admits the democratic argument. The artist cannot live unless he produces work which pleases the mass mind. You

know that, Foster, as well as I do."

"Alas, yes!" said Foster, wagging his head soberly.

"In the old days he appealed to the patronage of the cultured mind," said Mr. Jerningham. "A theatrical manager cannot afford to put on a play with some noble idea above the head of the box office. He has to ask himself, 'Will this please the rich tradesmen who pay for my stalls, and the little shop girls who pay for the pit and gallery?' In the same way the politician who loves his country perhaps—it hardly seems possible nowadays—knows that he cannot get a chance of election unless he falsifies his own faith and drags down his own ideals by an appeal to the lowest average intelligence, to the greed and vulgarity of the common mind, to the passions and prejudices of the vast mass of half-baked humanity who now decide the destiny of the human race. What does the little shopkeeper know of the difficult, delicate, and dangerous problem that has raised its head in India?"

"Nothing," agreed Foster.

"Exactly," said Mr. Jerningham, "but his vote will decide the fate of four hundred million people. What does the city clerk in Peckham know of the agricultural conditions in rural England?"

"Damn little, sir," said Foster.

"Quite!" said Mr. Jerningham. "But his vote will decide the question of free trade or protection. What does the factory hand in Manchester or Massachusetts know of the long heritage of ideals and experience and philosophy bequeathed by the master minds of the world from the time of Aristotle onwards?"

"About as much as I do," said Foster.

Mr. Jerningham smiled. "You must have absorbed something at Harrow, my lad. . . . But the mind of the mill hand will determine the trend of culture in England or the United States because it is to his mind that all appeals are made—over the wireless, on the political platform, in the cheap novel, in the Press, upon every question, including peace and war, where the decision is made by counting heads. You see, my dear Brandon, and my dear Foster, how the advance of democracy means the degradation of human life and the lowering of ideals."

Brandon challenged these sweeping assertions with a touch of impatience.

"If democracy had been consulted, the Great War wouldn't have happened. The instincts of the people are for peace. They want to get on

with their jobs. It was the old rulers who made such a hideous mess of the world."

Mr. Jerningham listened courteously, with a smile lengthening his thin lips.

"Not at all, my dear Brandon. Democracy went shouting and singing to the battlefields. At the first beat of the drum their pulse thrilled. They were glad to leave the drudgery of everyday life—until they came up against the first barrage fire. Democracy is most dangerous as a cause of war because it can be swept so easily by emotion. The old statecraft was a safer insurance policy for world peace."

"History is against you," said Brandon. "What about the Hundred Years' War and all the others—that endless sacrifice of manhood for dynastic quarrels?"

Mr. Jerningham waved his hand.

"Folly, I admit. The human mind is prone to evil. But those wars were on the whole trivial affairs conducted by professional armies according to rules. Warfare became most ruinous when democracy was organized and when whole nations hurled themselves against each other. We must get back to the small professional army led by gentlemen with ideas of sportsmanship and chivalry. Otherwise war becomes a disorderly massacre, as you two men must have observed in France and Flanders."

"Disgustingly vulgar!" said Foster, grinning behind his pipe.

"Precisely. And very wasteful," said Mr. Jerningham. "Our best intelligence, our most highly educated young men, were put on the same level as clodhoppers and blown to bits in the same trenches."

"The clodhoppers saved England," said Brandon with suppressed irritation. "Their lives were just as valuable as those of young gentlemen from the public schools."

Mr. Jerningham shook his head.

"There I think you make a mistake, Brandon. I'm not sneering at the clodhopper, God forbid. Personally I am a champion of the clodhopper, believing that revival of the English peasantry is the only way of saving this unhappy—and overindustrialized—country. But one doesn't use a race horse for drawing coal. One ought not to use a poet or a philosopher to stop shell fire. It's unscientific, and it's a waste of one's best material."

"One ought not to use peasant boys for stopping shell fire," argued Brandon. "The whole thing is damnable."

Mr. Geoffrey Jerningham agreed, subject to an amendment.

"Not unless they volunteer," he said. "I'm against conscription. War ought to be made by those who like the adventure of it. I happen to be one of those. As an individualist I detest the *levée en masse*, which is socialistic and democratic. I believe in the soldier of fortune who fights for the fun of the thing, and the professional soldier who studies the game scientifically."

"The professional soldier did not handle the last war with any blazing intelligence!" said Brandon. "It was the civilian soldier who came to his rescue."

Mr. Jerningham disputed the point.

"The professional soldier was hampered by political and democratic obstruction. The genius of Foch was thwarted by deputies in Paris. Haig—who was no genius, I admit—had to spend a lot of time countering political conspiracies against his command. But all that, my dear Brandon, is beside the point. We are arguing on broader issues, I think? I'm trying to prove to you that a country which destroys its aristocracy of intellect and breeding is rushing down the slippery slope, because it is surrendering to the worst and weakest elements of its social system. In this country, for example, the hard-working man, the ambitious man, the thrifty man, is penalized by the idler, the ne'er-do-well, the degenerate, the unfit, and, worst of all, the unlucky. They expect to be supported, and not in vain. That class is being enlarged and encouraged by the politician in search of votes who promises further benefits to the work-shy at the expense of the industrious, with the deliberate intention of pauperizing the whole nation and making them state-supported slaves. That will be the end of it, my dear fellows, believe me. The Servile State, as in Russia, with blind obedience to a central committee serving out free food—and not too much of it—free education—of its own brand—free entertainment—carefully selected—and free clothes—of the same pattern—in return for service to that blind, inhuman, abstract machine which is called the State. Mussolini is playing the same game with slightly different counters."

Brandon felt his blood run cold. It was a horrible prophecy in his country cottage. He disliked its prospect intensely. He refused to agree that this was the inevitable trend of the democratic system, and yet, secretly, he was afraid that underneath Mr. Jerningham's exaggeration there was enough truth to cause anxiety. The Press and other powers were standardizing intelligence and character. Politicians in all parties were bribing the electorate and robbing Peter to pay Paul. The best types in English life, the old peasantry, the country folk, families like the Avenels, were being destroyed by a

machine-made civilization supported by the taxation of wealth. The answer to all that, of course, was the uprising of the lower classes, as they were called in the age of snobbishness, a higher standard of living among the general mass, the elimination of the unfit by health conditions denied to their parents, the quickening and enlarging of the average mind by the wireless, the cinema, the rapidity of communication, the cheapness of books. But the standard reached was not high, he had to admit that. He could not deny the danger of standardization, nor the menace of a dependence on State support which might lead to State slavery of the mind as well as the body.

"Gentlemen," said Geoffrey Jerningham, still standing with his back to the hearthside on a cold evening when Brandon and Foster would have liked a larger share of the fire, "it is people like ourselves who must fight for the soul of the world. Here are three of us—an aristocrat—not my fault, you know—a painter, and a literary man. We three people in this little cottage are the heirs of that tradition of culture which built up the glory of European civilization. If we surrender that heritage—well, civilization crashes. With the passing of aristocracy, art, and *belles lettres*, there is no hope left. We must preserve the rights of the individual intelligence against the machine-made mind. We must battle for eccentricity against Babbitry. We must cherish our divine egotism against the standardization of the soul."

"Magnificent, sir!" said Foster. "But don't you think it's time to have a drink?"

"By all means," agreed Mr. Jerningham, "and while Mr. Brandon is preparing it I will bring in a little toy which may amuse you for half an hour. Have you ever played roulette? I'll show you my system. I'm going to have some fun with it when I go to Monte in December. It seems to me infallible."

He brought in a roulette wheel and explained his system at great length. It consisted in doubling and redoubling on certain numbers, according to some complicated plan beyond Brandon's knowledge of arithmetic.

Foster was vastly interested. He took the Bank, with a pile of haricot beans which he looted from Brandon's kitchen. Mr. Jerningham's system worked rather well, with occasional lapses which disconcerted that devotee of chance. Brandon slipped away from them and crept up to his own little room, where he was thinking out a short story. His sanctuary had been invaded by the outer world. Its peace was being very rudely disturbed. This study under the eaves was his last line of retreat. He became absorbed in his story, and many sheets fell from his typewriter to the bare boards, and the little bell rang with a musical tinkle, and the lamplight revealed the face of a

thinker with whom it goes well for once because the right words come easily and an idea builds up on sound lines of construction without a flaw of craftsmanship. That evening three hours passed before Brandon wrote "The End" and looked at his clock on the mantelpiece. Half-past two. Good heavens! Poor old Foster must have sneaked off to bed hours ago. . . .

Then Brandon heard the murmur of voices downstairs. They were still talking there, and for a moment he felt enraged because of this disturbance of his accustomed habits, the violation of his peace. Then he went down and opened the door of the sitting room. Mr. Jerningham was still spinning the roulette.

"Extraordinary!" he exclaimed. "That number has come up five times in succession. You see, my dear Foster, I should have won a clear two thousand of the best if those beans had been real money."

The candles were guttering in their sockets. The floor was strewn with haricot beans. The two gamblers—with haricot beans—had finished Brandon's whisky.

"Don't you people ever go to bed?" he asked in a rather disgruntled voice.

25

AFTER eight sittings from Pearl Jerningham, Foster told Brandon that he had painted a masterpiece and that if he touched it again he would spoil it.

"It's a fluke," he admitted, with unaccustomed humility. "It just happened to come right. The beautiful Pearl steps right out of the canvas and laughs at life. I've got the mockery in her eyes. I've got her whimsical mouth. Of course, one could hardly make a miss, really. She's all colour and character."

Brandon restrained his sense of jealousy. He would have given his left hand, almost, for the privilege of eight sittings with Pearl Jerningham and the gift or grace of immortalizing her beauty on a strip of canvas. In spite of his usual self-control he had sulked a little when Foster spent his afternoons with her. He could imagine her laughter at Foster's absurdities. He could imagine her mockery, as Foster called it—that sense of mirth which lurked in her eyes. Foster was a lucky blighter, as he told him. He was being paid two hundred pounds for easy work.

"Not so easy as all that," said Foster. "That portrait is the result of long years of toil and travail, to say nothing of the cost of paint, canvas, and a bleeding heart."

He mentioned that he had met the buyer of his masterpiece several times. He had dropped in to tea now and then, to see whether Foster was keeping trade-union hours and behaving himself in the presence of a lady.

"A strange and interesting type," said Foster. "I can't make him out. There's something attractive about him. He looks at Pearl Jerningham with a doglike devotion, and he even seems pleased when I talk to him civilly. He's almost deferential, as though he acknowledged the moral superiority of the artist soul—which is just as it should be."

"What infernal nonsense you talk sometimes!" exclaimed Brandon.

Foster said he was talking quite seriously. Being a pavement artist he studied the faces of the passers-by. There was something about Chantry's face which puzzled him. There was a kind of fear in his eyes which he tried to hide by smiles and vivacious talk, and an iron control of jumping nerves.

"It's the sort of look I tried to cultivate when I walked through Ypres expecting to lose a bit of my anatomy at any moment. It was almost impossible not to flinch or look over one's shoulder at the whine of a high velocity. While Chantry was looking at my portrait and talking to Pearl, he glanced over his shoulder as though afraid of something hitting him."

Brandon laughed impatiently.

"Your imagination puts me to shame. You ought to be a novelist, Val. You have all the talents."

"I'm pretty good at 'shove-ha'penny,' " said Foster modestly. "In my youth I was champion at marbles. I make no boast of it. But—lest I forget—the mysterious Chantry has asked us both to dinner. Pearl and her father will be there. Also the Avenel girls. It ought to be a pleasant evening. Pearl assures me that he provides good food and the best brand of cigars."

"You go," said Brandon. "I'm busy just now."

He shirked sitting down to table with Pearl's future husband. It would make him feel ill at ease. In any case, he had a horror of dinner parties. He was utterly unsocial.

"No excuses allowed," said Foster. "You and I belong to the old tradition, Brandon, although I bluff a bit and pretend to side with the post-war school."

Brandon raised his eyebrows.

"What's that got to do with it? Why drag in tradition?"

"When we get hurt we don't whine," said Foster. "When we're asked to dine with the future husbands of the women what wrecked our lives, we accept politely and behave like little gentlemen with stiff upper lips—carefully removing the band from the cigar. You see what I mean? We don't sulk, old man."

Brandon accepted the invitation, and several times during the evening wished that he hadn't. Pearl Jerningham was too kind to him, embarrassingly kind—as though she wished to make amends for letting him fall in love with her, though he had only himself to blame. Cyril Chantry, her future husband—those last three words kept nagging in Brandon's mind—held out his hand with overemphasized cordiality, and his smile suggested that Pearl had told him more than Brandon wanted him to know.

"So glad you have come!" he said. "As neighbours, we ought to know each other better."

Brandon murmured something inarticulate. He couldn't very well tell his host that he disliked his manner and detested the thought of his engagement to Pearl, and regretted setting foot across his threshold. He felt sulky and ill at ease. There were too many menservants about. Brandon was bothered because one of them stood behind his chair at dinner and kept filling up his glass, and brought another knife when he used the wrong one absent-mindedly. He was thinking of the folk who must once have sat under these old beams—the real old farming folk of England, sturdy old men with beards under their chins, buxom girls who worked in the dairy, the mothers of long-limbed sons. Now this old house, built in Tudor times, belonged to a City shark, who played at farming during week-ends, and gave cocktail parties on his terrace to shifty-eyed young men and loud-voiced women who drove from town on Sunday afternoons, as Brandon knew, because more often than not they called at his cottage to ask the way.

Brandon watched him as he sat at the head of his table. He looked overworked and nervy. He had a habit of putting his finger between his collar and neck now and then, as though his collar were a size too tight. He ate very little of his own food, but drank a good deal of wine, which presently flushed his pale skin slightly and took the tiredness out of his eyes. Brandon guessed his age as forty-five, and counted the difference between that and Pearl Jerningham's age. Fifteen years, and rather horrible, he thought. It was gruesome to think of this man with his arms about Pearl, pawing her with his plump hands, kissing her. Brandon cursed himself for coming and then was ashamed of these ugly thoughts crawling up from the

sludge of his subconsciousness. He was breaking the man's bread, eating his salt. It was just damned jealousy—the green-eyed monster—which tormented him at this man's table and made him sulky and sour.

Brandon failed to see the secret fear which Foster had imagined. Once or twice, certainly, when others were talking—Mr. Jerningham was giving forth, as usual—a look of melancholy and introspection crept into his eyes, but he roused himself quickly to make some smiling remark to Pearl, or give a sharp look at one of the servants who had dropped a spoon on the polished boards. He was certainly a good host, genial, easy, conversational, and cultured. He said some rather good things about art for the benefit of Foster and seemed to know pictures, remembering names of the modern school unknown to Brandon. He mentioned that he had a real Constable—no fake—in his house in Cadogan Square.

"I picked it up in Paris. I spotted it at once, although it was very dirty. It's worth a good deal."

"Do you go about picking up things like that?" asked Foster. "Tell me where to look."

Cyril Chantry smiled good-humouredly.

"It's a matter of luck and the right amount of knowledge. I'm fond of antique furniture. Look at that William and Mary tallboy. I bought it for a few pounds near Bath. Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Of course, one has to have the few pounds," observed Foster thoughtfully. He was enjoying himself. The food was excellent. The wine well chosen. This room and this company suited his temperament.

After those words of Foster's Chantry made a remark which seemed to Brandon rank hypocrisy.

"Perhaps. It's better not to have the money. It leads to endless worry—getting and spending."

"I could do with a little more worry," said Foster, and Mr. Jerningham, on the other side of the table, heartily agreed.

"My dear Chantry, as a wizard of finance you cannot make me believe that you underestimate the advantages of having a sufficient supply of what economists call 'the medium of exchange'!"

Chantry shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"If one has the gambler's instinct one gets a thrill out of the chase. It's not bad fun matching one's wits against the world and taking a risk now and then. That's what appealed to me most when I started my career as a

highwayman. But the strain begins to tell after a time. I'm a man of simple tastes, really. I'm fond of country life. I should have made a good farmer."

Mr. Jerningham glanced across the table at Val Foster with an ironical smile.

"Most of us have a theoretical belief in the simple life," he said. "Personally, being a cynic, I regard that as an agreeable pose. I'm perfectly prepared to lead the simple life on ten thousand a year. Anything less than that I regard as squalor."

Pearl laughed at her father across the table.

"It's all a question of relativity," she remarked. "I could put up with squalor on half that amount as pin money."

Mr. Jerningham ignored this interruption and addressed his future son-in-law again.

"I confess, my dear fellow, that I envy you your knowledge of arithmetic and your field of adventure. I'm a bit of a gambler myself. I get a pleasant thrill out of a little flutter at the tables now and then in dear old Monte. Fifty pounds, carefully placed according to a system, with a superstitious belief in the god of luck—wonderfully amusing! But that's child's play compared with your game of high finance. Your counters are gold mines and copper mines and wheat pools and rubber stocks. Instead of watching a little white ball running round a ring and dropping into an uncertain place, you watch the gold markets, the rise and fall of the Bank rate, the weather chart—which means a bad harvest in Canada or a drought in the Argentine—the political situation in Chile and Peru, Soviet Russia and the U. S. A., to say nothing of this small island with its Imperial possessions. Your green cloth is the world itself. *Le grand jeu!* What a nerve you must have! What a thrill you must get out of life. And it's quite evident that you were born under a lucky star. Everything you touch turns to gold."

Cyril Chantry listened to this rhodomontade with a look of cynical amusement and then laughed uneasily as though suspicious of irony in this speech by his future father-in-law.

"You exaggerate my importance," he said. "I'm not one of the Rothschilds. I'm just 'someone in the city' picking up a hard living. As for my lucky star, I've been searching the heavens for it lately with a telescope."

"That's not very flattering to my self-conceit," said Pearl Jerningham, interrupting this dialogue after a laughing conversation with Val Foster.

Chantry turned his eyes towards her, and they were illumined by what Foster had called his "doglike devotion."

“I was talking about financial things,” he said. “The money market and sordid things like that. In this room I don’t need a telescope to see my luck.”

He touched her hand for a moment, and it was one of those times when Brandon wished he hadn’t come to dinner at Yeoman’s Farm.

Audrey Avenel was sitting next to him. She told him that she had seen an announcement of his book—ready next week. She was quite excited about it and had already put her name down for a copy at the bookshop at Guildford.

“An author gets six free copies,” said Brandon. “I meant to give you one. Why squander seven-and-six?”

“Why give away your own books?” asked Audrey. “People ought to buy them. I don’t ask a bootmaker to give me a pair of free boots.”

Brandon smiled, but pointed out the fallacy of her argument.

“You must have a new pair of boots now and then. A new novel isn’t a necessity. It’s generally an outrage.”

“All the same,” said Audrey, “I should be very much honoured to receive that copy, and if you would autograph it I should feel very proud of myself.”

“It’s waiting for you,” said Brandon. “With the author’s kind regards, in his best handwriting.”

Audrey Avenel protested against the austerity of that inscription. Couldn’t he make it a little less formal? she asked. Why not “With love from Francis Brandon”? It would increase the value of the volume when she showed it to her friends. Of course, if he couldn’t bring himself to go so far as that, he might put “With affectionate regards,” or “With cordial comradeship.”

“Of course I don’t want you to be insincere,” she added. “Don’t write anything which you don’t really mean.”

Brandon promised to put “With love from the author.” He would use the privilege of advancing years, suitable to a bachelor uncle.

“That’s absurd,” said Audrey. “Why do you always pretend that you’re old enough to be my grandfather and talk to me as if I were a little chit just out of school?”

Brandon was surprised because she seemed vexed all of a sudden after her laughing mood. For some reason she was hurt or annoyed by his suggestion of being her bachelor uncle, or old enough to play that part. Perhaps she thought he was talking down to her, treating her as an unintelligent child. But, after all, there was almost as much difference

between their ages as between Pearl Jerningham and Chantry. She was twenty-one and he was thirty-three. She was a child of the post-war generation. He had been born in time for the war which had knocked out his boyhood. The bachelor uncle part was more than a pose he adopted to this girl who had offered him her cheek one day like a schoolgirl after a treat in town. It was how he felt towards her now, untouched by any of that allurement which disturbed him in the presence of Pearl Jerningham. But he was sorry that he had given her the idea of intellectual superiority, or of talking down to her. It was quite wrong, anyhow. He had a high respect for her intelligence and quality of character.

He assured her of this by a word or two.

"On the contrary, I regard you as an intellectual lady. I'm keen to know what you think about my latest effort. But I can't help the stealthy approach of middle age."

"Years away," she told him. "Why pose as an octogenarian? In any case, what do a few years matter? Look at Pearl and Mr. Chantry."

Brandon did not care to look at Pearl and Mr. Chantry, but he glanced to that end of the table. Pearl was laughing at some new nonsense being talked by her father and Val Foster. She looked more beautiful to-night than Brandon had ever seen her—in a black frock revealing her arms and shoulders, and with her bronze-gold hair touched by the light of the candles in front of her on the oak table. She seemed already in possession here, taking her future place in this house which would be hers, with that other one in Cadogan Square. Never again would she have to stay in cheap *pensions* on the Riviera, or patch up her frocks in the bedrooms of second-class hotels. As the wife of Cyril Chantry, the financier, she would have all the things she desired, the luxury without which life seemed squalid to her. Perhaps it was the consciousness of this which made her eyes so bright and shining. She seemed to become aware that Brandon was looking at her across the distance of the table. She turned suddenly from Val Foster with whom she was exchanging epigrams, and her eyes travelled to those of Brandon and sent him a smiling message.

She was sorry for him because he sat there looking miserable for her sake. She felt tenderly towards him because he loved her and had no chance of fulfilling his dream. She raised her glass to him and touched it with her lips, smiling across its rim. Brandon raised his own glass, unconscious that it trembled slightly. A second later Pearl was laughing with Val Foster again.

"Do you think Pearl will be happy with Mr. Chantry?" asked Audrey in a quiet voice.

"Why not?"

"Perhaps one ought to ask if he will be happy with her," said Audrey. "He doesn't look very joyous to-night. Something on his mind, I should say."

"His money, perhaps," said Brandon. "Wealth is rather worrying, I'm told. Didn't he say so?"

Audrey looked round the room and made a remark which startled Brandon. Had he given himself away? he wondered.

"I feel rather uncomfortable, somehow. Things are happening at this dinner table which make me feel that there is some hidden drama going on—in people's minds, I mean. Suppressed emotion, mental uneasiness, secret thoughts, hidden by light laughter and the usual chit-chat. What's happening? I have a sense of impending doom, as though we had sat down thirteen at table or something awful like that."

She looked at him with smiling eyes, but with a puzzled look in them.

"What makes you think that?" asked Brandon.

"You do, for one," she told him. "You're forcing yourself to be polite and chatty. It's a great strain, isn't it? You're thinking of something else all the time. Mr. Chantry over there looks as though there were a ghost behind his chair—not altogether the happy lover. Pearl's laughter doesn't ring quite true. Sylvia is brooding about her kinky-haired boy. Mr. Jerningham keeps talking but detests his future son-in-law. The only person who is thoroughly natural and perfectly pleased with himself is Mr. Foster."

"What about you?" asked Brandon, smiling at these dark imaginings.

Audrey said that she felt in the presence of spectres. She didn't like the atmosphere of the room. She had a sense of being "wropped" in mystery.

"I'm not aware of it," said Brandon. He looked at his host again and could not see any spectral shadow near him. One of the menservants was whispering something to him, and he rose quietly and made an apology for leaving the table for a few moments.

"A telephone call from New York," he explained. "I can't escape from business, even in this old farmhouse. Excuse me, won't you?"

"Astonishing man!" said Mr. Jerningham when Chantry had left the room. "Always at the end of a wire. Always listening to little voices calling to him with whispered words what to buy or sell half an hour before anybody else. Very likely while we're drinking this excellent port he's selling millions of shares which he hasn't bought, or buying millions which

somebody else holds on an option. A great game for a man with nerve. What he says over that telephone to New York between three whiffs of a cigar may ruin thousands of small people who have been gambling on margin—or increase their imaginary wealth until Wall Street decides to begin a massacre. Very immoral, no doubt, but highly amusing."

"Not more immoral than having a little flutter at Monte, Father," said Pearl Jerningham. "People will gamble. It's a natural instinct. It's the dream of Aladdin's lamp which we all have in our hearts. Besides, Cyril says you dramatize his methods. He doesn't juggle with millions. He merely watches the world markets."

"Precisely!" said Mr. Jerningham. "Overproduction of rubber in Peru may mean the ruin of my shares in Anglo-Malays. A panic on Wall Street has immediate reactions on the English Stock Exchange. A revolution in the Argentine may ruin maiden ladies in Surrey or raise the price of cattle in Ireland. It's the financial geniuses like your future husband who make money by buying and selling on those hazards. You needn't call it gambling. You can call it 'intelligent anticipation of world events.' "

"Father," said Pearl, "you're talking fantastic nonsense, and you know it. You're sitting at the table of a man whom you accuse of being an international crook. It isn't fair, and it isn't true. It's disgusting."

She spoke very angrily, startling her father and the two Avenel girls.

"I made no such accusation, my dear," said Mr. Jerningham. "You utterly mistake me. . . . This is an excellent cigar. I'm happy to think that I shall be the father-in-law of a man who can afford them."

Mr. Jerningham had drunk a glass too much of his future son-in-law's port. His face was slightly flushed. Pearl's sudden annoyance reduced him to silence.

"Shall we go into the drawing room?" she asked with a sudden coldness in her voice, as though for once she were offended with her father, who as a rule amused her. She glanced over at Audrey Avenel, and Brandon thought she behaved as though she were already the mistress of Yeoman's Farm.

It was when the ladies had left the table that Chantry came back from the telephone.

"Sorry to have been so long," he said quietly. "Pass the port round, won't you?"

Brandon passed the port to Val Foster, who took another glass and winked at him as though to say, "Fine stuff!" But Brandon was watching Chantry. Perhaps that telephone message had been unpleasant. He was

breathing rather hard, as though the room had suddenly become too hot for him. His shirt front made a slight noise against his waistcoat and he looked very pale until he helped himself to a glass of brandy.

"Do you think we are turning the corner of all this trade depression?" asked Mr. Jerningham, helping himself to another cigar.

Chantry shrugged his shoulders.

"We're walking towards a crash," he said gloomily. "Our standard of living is too high in comparison with our foreign rivals. They work harder for less wages. We can't compete with them. . . . Try some of this brandy. It's rather good."

Over the brandy Mr. Jerningham talked gravely about the demoralization of the English people, the pauperizing effects of socialistic governments, the iniquity of the politicians. Val Foster said, "Hear, hear!" at intervals, and winked heavily at Brandon. Chantry appeared to listen politely to his future father-in-law. But he was really not listening at all. He was busy with his own thoughts.

"Shall we join the ladies?" he asked presently.

26

On the way home after that dinner, Foster and Brandon took the Avenel girls back to their house. Foster walked with Audrey, and Brandon with Sylvia. It was a moonlight night and their shadows walked ahead of them on the white road from Yeoman's Farm. Foster's laughter rang out as he strode ahead with Audrey, pretending to need the help of her arm—perhaps needing it a little after that good port and other entertainment.

"It was very sporting of you the other night," said Sylvia. "I was nearly copped by Father. Thanks most frightfully for putting up Robin."

"I was glad to help," said Brandon. "But I don't like being an accomplice in a plot to deceive benevolent parents. Supposing your father had walked into the room and discovered Master Robin?"

Sylvia laughed quietly at this suggestion of melodrama.

"There would have been some atmospherics, I suppose. Father would have denounced me as a woman of sin. He would have asked me why I had lied to him, and other ridiculous questions like that."

"Well, after all, you did lie to him, didn't you?" asked Brandon quietly.

He could see the shrug of Sylvia's pretty shoulders.

"It's the only way of self-defense against parental oppression. Father won't let Robin come to the house because he suspects him of being a bad egg. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Moreland—the vicar's wife—made mischief about a girl named Jill Mannering, who behaved rather foolishly with Robin a year ago. There was nothing in it really. Robin told me the whole story."

"They went away together, didn't they?" asked Brandon. "Week-ends in wayside inns."

"Nothing happened," said Sylvia calmly. "Boy and girl stuff, and quite harmless. Robin is perfectly nice."

"I'll take your word for it," said Brandon. "But what are you going to do about him, exactly, if you don't mind my asking?"

Sylvia was silent for a moment, as though wondering whether she did mind him asking.

"Do you think two people can live in London on four pounds a week?" she asked.

Brandon had lived in London on less than that, but it hadn't been easy. And he hadn't been brought up in the comforts of Harley Hall.

"It needs a lot of courage," he said.

"I have a lot," said Sylvia. "So has Robin, really, though he looks weak. Anyhow, I'm thinking about it, but you needn't tell anyone. Not even Audrey. There's sure to be a row."

Audrey and Val Foster had reached the gate of Harley Hall, which made a good picture there in the moonlight, with its pointed gables and high chimneys and old black beams framing its plastered walls. It seemed a pity that a daughter of this old house should want to escape to the squalor of a garage in London on four pounds a week. Sylvia Avenel said she had a lot of courage. She would need it after the first ecstasy with a boy who had a glint of gold on his upper lip but none of that precious metal as a reserve in time of trouble. But Brandon could not blame her. He was no cynic about love, having become a victim of that passion lately. On four pounds a week with Pearl Jerningham he could have faced life gaily and made a joke of poverty, if she had seen the fun of it, which she didn't. How could he talk wise old man stuff to this child who was eager to slip away from luxury for love's sake? As a sentimentalist—his critics called him that—he sympathized with her disregard of a sheltered home life, compared with this rash and desperate adventure to which she was called by the mating instinct. It might end in

failure and squalor, but it would be worse if she funked it, preferring tennis lawns and herbaceous borders to the fulfilment of life.

"I admire your pluck," he said. "Good luck, anyhow."

"Come on, you laggards!" cried Audrey. "What are you talking about so earnestly, while Mr. Foster and I make the welkin ring with our unseemly mirth?"

Colonel Avenel had come down to the gates with a black spaniel, and the light of his cigar made a point of fire as he moved towards them.

"My dear Audrey," he said reprovingly, "I heard your laugh a mile away. You really ought to remember that you are no longer a schoolgirl."

"My fault, sir," explained Val Foster. "I'm extremely humorous when I am warmed with wine."

He was certainly amused with himself after Chantry's old brandy.

Colonel Avenel gave a good-natured laugh.

"I daresay you had a good dinner. That fellow can afford it. I expect he dodges the income tax."

"He provides excellent port out of the money he robs from widows and orphans," said Foster. "His old brandy had an admirable aroma. These bandits do themselves proud."

Sylvia pressed Brandon's hand.

"Thanks for understanding," she said in a low voice.

Audrey, who had been laughing so gaily with Val Foster, turned to Brandon and held out her hand.

"I'm longing to get that copy of your book. I hope it will be a huge success."

"Not a chance of that. I'm only read by a few kind friends. Thanks for being one of them."

"The most ardent!" said Audrey.

She waved her hand to him, and cried, "All right, Father!" when Colonel Avenel remarked that it was getting late.

On the way back to Willowbrook Cottage Val Foster took Brandon's arm.

"A good dinner," he remarked, "and pleasant company, barring the man who paid for our food. I think Pearl is going to marry a fellow with a guilty conscience. He had a hang-dog look."

"Nerves," said Brandon. "Always on the end of a telephone or a tape machine. I can imagine nothing worse."

"My dear Chucklehead," said Foster, "I can imagine thousands of worse things. Unprofitable art, for instance. The self-tortured life of an unsuccessful novelist. Give me the little worries of a successful financier."

He grabbed Brandon's arm outside Willowbrook Cottage.

"Look at your insanitary dwelling place," he said. "If I were to paint it like that, with the moonlight silvering its chimney pots, I'd never hold up my head in Chelsea or Maida Vale. They would say, 'Poor old Foster is painting Christmas cards. He's pandering to the sentiment of the little shop girls.' Nature is deplorably slushy in rural England, old boy. Give me the stark realism of a London slum."

He had enjoyed his dinner at Yeoman's Farm.

27

Mrs. Brandon returned home a night or two before Val Foster departed reluctantly from that rural England which he pretended to despise. The two men had cast an anxious glance round the cottage before they went to meet her at Guildford, and spent half an hour or so tidying up so that she might be spared too much of a shock at this homecoming. There had been an unfortunate accident in the little drawing room where Foster had spilt some candle grease on one of the rugs. It was that night he had played roulette with Mr. Jerningham. He had also damaged the edge of the mantelpiece by leaving cigarettes to burn themselves out. The kitchen sink required attention, because he had scraped his palette in it. There were other signs of bachelor tenancy and bohemian habits in the bedrooms. Brandon had changed his underclothing and left it lying in a corner of the room. For some odd reason there was a pair of boots on the dressing table. For another odd reason there were some dirty plates and cutlery in one of the linen cupboards. Probably Brandon had put them there absent-mindedly one night when he had sat up late with Foster and felt a sudden craving for a snack of food. He had carried up some cold sausages to Foster's room while the argument continued. . . .

Mrs. Brandon gave a murmur of dismay at the sight of the candle grease on the best rug, but otherwise all was well. She was glad to get back to the cottage and was agreeably surprised that it hadn't been burnt down during

her absence by two absent-minded men. She was also glad and surprised to find her son looking well fed and in good health—not even a cold by getting his feet wet!

"I'm afraid we mothers exaggerate our own importance," she remarked. "You seem to have flourished without me, Frank. I might have spared myself sleepless nights wondering if you were all right!"

"Good heavens, yes!" exclaimed Brandon. "Foster and I have been living like fighting cocks. What's the family news? I expect you've been working yourself to the bone."

Mrs. Brandon smiled and did not deny a time of drudgery.

"The usual little troubles," she exclaimed. "Lucy's monthly nurse was at daggers drawn with the temporary help. That young person refused to carry up the meals. When I spoke crossly to her, she flaunted out of the house and sent her young man to fetch her box."

"And so you had to do her job," said Frank. "Why didn't you tell me in your letters? You said everything was going on all right."

"The important things," said Mrs. Brandon. "It's a beautiful baby, and Lucy is getting strong again. It's an awful pity that Martin is out of work just now. Lucy frets about it."

"He's hopeless," said Brandon. "Isn't he earning any money at all?"

"Odd guineas," said Mrs. Brandon. "He writes an occasional article for a cinema magazine—reviews of the latest film pictures. I'm afraid it won't last, though. He wrote a scathing article about a new film, denouncing its picture of luxury and vice as an outrage against the working classes. The editor is afraid of losing his advertisements."

Brandon grinned behind his pipe.

"I must say I admire that fellow's remarkable honesty. He doesn't care a curse for editors or advertisers."

"Yes, but what about his wife and new-born babe?" asked Foster. "Personally I call such honesty self-indulgence and self-conceit. He denounces a picture of little ladies bathing in champagne—which nobody believes—and sends the hat round to buy milk for the babies he helps to bring into an overpopulated world. Disgusting hypocrisy, I call it."

"Well, I'll leave you to argue that out," said Mrs. Brandon, smiling at Foster's violence of language. "I expect you two have been thrashing out these questions ever since I've been away. Mrs. Narracott tells me that she

couldn't get a word in edgewise and that she wonders you haven't talked your heads off."

"A libel, my dear lady!" cried Val Foster. "I've painted several masterpieces, and Frank has led a life of peace and meditation, with occasional inspiration from a philosopher at his hearthside."

Mrs. Brandon laughed again and spoke a word about her son's new novel.

"I saw it on the bookstall at Waterloo. '*The Way of Escape.* Out to-day.' It gave me quite a thrill. Good luck to it, my dear. It's the best thing you've done."

Brandon flushed slightly at this praise from his mother. She was not a good judge of his work, thinking it all wonderful. But this book which she had read in proof form had made her laugh a good deal and once had made her weep. She knew his characters. A good deal of his father's life was there. She could attest its truth, and for that reason her belief that it was the best thing he had done was very pleasing to him.

"Thanks, Mother," he said quietly. "I hope it won't drop dead on the bookstalls."

It was on the following night that he received his first professional criticism of the new novel, and it gave him a shock, as if someone were divulging his innermost secrets in the market place, or stripping him naked before a crowd. That was how he felt when Foster turned on the wireless shortly before the time for news and weather and happened to get on to the vibration of a feminine voice.

"Surely I know that low contralto," he said. "It's dear old Lydia, or I'll eat my hat."

She was giving her weekly talk on books. She was dealing severely with a popular novelist much read by sentimental women.

"Many people," she said, "will read this novel with pleasure as an escape from reality and as a narcotic to frayed nerves. Well, there is something to be said for that. Such books have the value of patent medicines and harmless—or more or less harmless—drugs. But they have no claim to be considered as literature. They do not present a picture of life as it really is, making us more aware of ourselves, revealing us to our own consciousness, interpreting the people who pass in our street or sit at the same table with us, bringing us nearer to truth. This author has no touch of style, no sensitiveness to the undertones of life, no sense of artistry. He has developed a technique by which he can turn out similar novels as a piano organ grinds out its tunes. It

is, of course, profitable to him, and fiction of that kind is not without a certain value to starved souls. Let us leave it at that, without harshness of judgment."

"She leaves him for dead, poor brute!" said Foster. "That woman has no bowels of compassion. A pox on all critics!"

"Listen!" said Mrs. Brandon, suddenly dropping her book.

"*The Way of Escape*," said the voice of Lydia Beaumont, "is a novel of a different kind. I should like my listeners to make a note of it and ask for it at their libraries. It is by a young author named Francis Brandon, whose previous novels—including one called *The Secret Life*—have appealed only to those who belong to that little coterie—the intelligentsia—who are sometimes called 'highbrows.' In these previous books there was no appeal to the average reader. The style was difficult. There was but little story. Their human interest was limited. Their value to the initiated lay in their subtlety of vision which saw the soul of commonplace things, and in a beauty of expression which seemed to struggle for life out of a certain harshness of thought, as Rodin's sculpture gives a sense of vitality and releases the spirit out of a rock of granite."

"Good God!" said Brandon.

He was standing by the hearthside with his pipe in one hand and a spill in the other, as he had gone to get a light from the log fire. The spill of paper fell from his fingers, and he raised his hand to thrust back the hair from his forehead with a look of stupefaction.

"Shut up!" said Foster. "Listen to the wench. It's worth money to you, old lad."

". . . delicate, sensitive, exquisite in sympathy," said the voice of Lydia Beaumont, interrupted by these private remarks in a Surrey cottage. "This novel is a revelation of new power. Mr. Brandon deals with life on a broad canvas. Its pages are crowded with characters, each one of them alive, humorous, tragic, real. They are not smart people, or well dressed people, or the kind of people about whom most novelists write nowadays—their own little set of nervy intellectuals. Mr. Brandon's characters dwell in mean streets. They are in the front-line trenches of life, doing the dirty work, the hard work, the dangerous work of our daily battle. They are on the dole, some of them. They are charladies and working mothers and clerks and small shopkeepers, among whom Mr. Brandon's chief character—a noble and simple-minded doctor—goes about with devotion and service, and a dream of beauty in his soul which tempts him as St. Anthony was tempted by a vision of fair women. It sounds dull. It sounds drab. It sounds

commonplace, but it is aglow with a humour and sympathy which give it all a spiritual beauty. It is vital. It is true. It is intensely moving. Its author is Francis Brandon, and it is published by Hoskins and Spree. . . . The next book I should like to mention is——"

Val Foster turned off the wireless, and looked curiously at Francis Brandon, who still stood with his back to the wood fire and his pipe clenched in his left hand.

"Pretty good work!" remarked Foster. "Well done, Lydia!"

Brandon raised his right hand and seemed to wipe some invisible beads of perspiration off his forehead.

"Do people actually listen to that kind of thing?" he asked.

"Millions of 'em," said Foster. "It will do you a bit of good."

"They won't believe a word of it," said Brandon. "They'll be fools if they do. Gosh! How appalling!"

He was very much disconcerted. He was like a schoolboy praised before his form by the headmaster—made a fool of in public, according to his own ideas.

Mrs. Brandon was silent for a moment. Her eyes were very bright when she went up to her son and put her hands on his shoulder and kissed him on the cheek.

"Oh, Frank!" she said. "Perhaps they'll listen to her! Perhaps people will read your books at last!"

"Don't you believe it, Mother," said Brandon. "People wouldn't read my books if they were given away with a pound of tea."

"I used to detest that woman," said Mrs. Brandon thoughtfully.

28

Brandon felt a little hipped when Val Foster departed from him. The cottage seemed strangely quiet and empty, and laughter went away with him, because Brandon needed the stimulus of this irrepressible humorist, this argumentative and genial cynic, to resist the instinctive melancholy which overtook him when he was alone with his own thoughts. Yet he had a sense of relief also. One can have too much even of laughter. Incessant, eternal "jawbation" becomes demoralizing. Foster's arrival had made a public

house of this country cottage which Brandon had guarded from outside intrusion for a peaceful hermitage. Now he had regained his sanctuary and his house of dreams. With his mother back again, the orderly routine of his days was reëstablished. He could go up to his room and shut the door against all invaders, including Mrs. Narracott with her plaguy gossip.

Time to think out a new novel! *The Way of Escape*, just published, seemed to have made a bit of a hit, incredible as it seemed. At least, it was getting a good Press, though it was too early yet to tell whether the reviews would have any effect on sales. The critics were astoundingly and embarrassingly kind to a novel over which he had despaired and agonized as usual. Halfway through he had almost decided to destroy it. It had seemed to him utterly commonplace and sordid. Reading back a score of times he believed that he had failed to give a spark of life to his characters. He had funked situations which came perilously near to melodrama when put into fiction, although they were actual life stories told to him by his father.

His descriptions of London, which he had tried to etch with a fine point, appeared blurred and coarse and clumsy. He had tried to suggest a spiritual beauty behind the squalor of mean streets and drab lives, but before the book was finished he had been disheartened by a sense of failure—in spite of odd moments when he was inclined to believe that it wasn't too bad. Now the critics were overpraising his stuff, reading into it more than he had attempted, ignoring its faults, which stared out at him, making him ridiculous by their eulogies. They used the word "genius"—which was tragically absurd. They dared to suggest that he had the touch of Dickens. They even thanked heaven that at last there was a novelist of English life who revealed the soul of the people and had a sense of humour and pity unspoilt by cynicism. They were held "breathless" by his story. Several of them had read this novel "far into the night." He had "racked them with suspense." The final tragedy of a noble soul had been almost insupportable to them. To judge from some of these reviews Francis Brandon, novelist, had caused emotional crises in the homes of many middle-aged journalists, and Fleet Street was moved to its foundations.

Brandon, reading these reviews of his books on little slips which came to him in buff envelopes from a press-cutting agency, might have lost the sense of humour which lurked behind his touch of melancholy, if he had not perceived serious discrepancies in the views of his critics, and irreconcilable accounts of his work. Mr. Mark Ambrose, one of those two men who had failed to fetch Lydia Beaumont that night in his cottage, wrote in no less than four journals that Francis Brandon's *Way of Escape* was ruthless in its revelation of the underworld.

"*The dastardly character of a London doctor who performs an illegal operation on a poor girl is described with a power, an intuition, a subtlety, which can only be compared to Balzac at his best. Here is a novelist who refuses to pander to the nauseating sentimentality of 'best selling' fiction. He does not shirk the ugliness of reality. He dissects life with a surgeon's knife. It is a book not for the many but for the few, not for those who wish to view life through rose-coloured glasses, but for those who can stand the cold light of truth and stare unafraid at the martyrdom of man. It is a brave book.*"

Brandon read this review with a crease in his forehead while he sucked an empty pipe. He had been very uncivil to Mark Ambrose on that early morning when he had appeared after a night in a broken-down car. This distinguished critic was heaping coals of fire on his head. But it was a pity he believed the doctor had performed an illegal operation. The whole point of the book was that he was falsely accused.

Mr. Bertrand Wix in the *Tribune* was equally kind, but not to be reconciled with Mark Ambrose.

"*I have never read a more charming novel than* The Way of Escape," he wrote. "*I am so tired of those ruthless writers, those novelists who believe that strength lies in violence, and truth in ugliness, that I have read with relief a novel of life in mean streets, written with exquisite delicacy and restraint, without one coarse or filthy word, without a touch of ugly realism, and yet complete in truth. It is brilliant, joyous, and human. It makes one believe more in the spiritual purpose of life. It is racy with the humour of the streets. The character of the heroine, Jane Wainwright, is unforgettable in its graciousness and charm. I have fallen in love with her.*"

He had fallen in love with the wrong woman. Jane Wainwright was not the heroine. She was a minor character, arrested for being drunk and disorderly on a Saturday night. Otherwise the review was very helpful and generous, although the last sentence was disheartening.

"*This is not a book for the great public. It will appeal only to those who can appreciate the elusive quality of an English Proust —very few, I'm afraid.*"

Brandon lit his pipe with some of these reviews, which were very useful in the form of spills. This general chorus of praise, however irreconcilable in its character, was something which he had not experienced before. And apart from Mr. Mark Ambrose, who had made a bad shot about his doctor, some of the reviewers seemed to have read his book and to know what it was about. They overpraised him, but he could not pretend that he was proof against praise. It was a reward for all his brain fag, his effort at creation, his mental labours—some of which he had inflicted on his mother in irritability and introspective silence. Most of them seemed to think that it would have a limited sale, without appeal to the big public. Well, he had made up his mind to that. But he had a secret hope that it might go into a few editions and earn a little money. A few hundred pounds would come in very useful now that the winter was coming on. He might take his mother away somewhere before the fogs came. She had had a touch of asthma last night. They might stay in some little *pension* in Nice, or go to one of those winter sports places in Switzerland, where there were cheap châlets as well as the big hotels patronized by the smart crowd.

His aunt Alice and his cousin Judy might care to use the cottage while he was away. Poor Henry Martindale had been taken away at last to the Cancer Hospital, where he couldn't linger out much longer. Judy would be glad of a quiet time in the country, poor kid. . . . Then there were Lucy and her eccentric Martin. If *The Way of Escape* brought in a decent check now and then, he might spare a bit for that little flat in Battersea where three babies crowded up the floor space and kept their father laughing although he had lost his job again. There were lots of other ways in which a hundred pounds or so would come in handy—some new shirts, for instance, to replace those with frayed cuffs; possibly a new suit or two, though old suits were more comfortable; a number of books which he had promised himself when he had a bit of luck; a subscription to the Times Book Club; a new Dunhill pipe; a wedding gift to Pearl Jerningham. . . .

His imagination conjured up many possibilities of self-indulgence and general benevolence—another form of self-indulgence—which would be within his range if his new novel earned an extra hundred pounds beyond the sum he had received in advance of royalties. He worked out the arithmetic of these agreeable fantasies, keeping strictly to that limit. He knocked out the Dunhill and put in three pairs of pants. He extended the *pension* in Nice to eight weeks instead of four by giving up the books and the library subscription. He reduced it reluctantly to six in order to squeeze out a ten-pound note for Judy and the same for Lucy. After all, it would not go very far, that extra hundred—but he was becoming a megalomaniac

because he was slightly intoxicated by those reviews which overpraised a novel no better than others he had written, and with no more chance of popular success, as they warned him even while they praised him.

Brandon put the brake upon those runaway imaginings until one morning at breakfast, three weeks after Val Foster's visit had ended. Mrs. Brandon noticed that he was quiet on the other side of the table and did not seem interested in the morning paper. A letter lay by the side of his plate, and he put the butter knife on it to keep it from blowing away on a gusty morning which announced its turbulence through the open window. He had read it twice and then had put it on one side under that paperweight. Mrs. Brandon wondered if he had had a restless night. He looked pale, she thought. He had lost himself in some daydream and started slightly when she asked a second time for the marmalade.

"Sorry, Mother!"

"Headachy this morning?" she asked. "No bad news in that letter, I hope?"

For a moment she wondered if it might be from that girl Pearl Jerningham, awakening his wound, poor dear.

"On the contrary," he answered. "It's rather good. In fact, it seems rather too good to be true. It's—incredible."

He took the butter knife off the letter he had been reading and grabbed the folded paper before it was blown away by the draught from the window.

"I don't know what to think about it," he said. "I'm flabbergasted. It knocks me edgewise."

He gave a queer laugh, harsh and excited, and stood up from the breakfast table, staring out of the window at that view beyond his garden blurred by the white mists of autumn.

"Tell me," said Mrs. Brandon, "what's happened, Frank? Has your book gone into a new edition?"

Brandon looked at his mother with a strange twisted smile.

"It's gone into an edition of thirty thousand copies," he said. "They can't print it fast enough. All the bookshops are repeating orders. Every typist girl in London is demanding it from the libraries. Every maiden lady in South Kensington is queueing up at Mudie's for it. American publishers are getting excited about it. Mother, I've disgraced myself! *The Way of Escape* is a best seller! Did you ever hear of such a thing? Me—of all writers in the world!"

He sat down in his chair again and laughed at this extraordinary joke which had happened to him in a country cottage.

29

BRANDON was scared by his success, after that first outburst of laughter at getting into the list of "best sellers." The thing was going beyond a joke. It was extending to the magnitude of a miracle. It was alarming. It was threatening to tilt his mental equilibrium. It might upset his whole scheme and philosophy of life. It might become a menace to him—a monstrous embarrassment—a man trap.

The Way of Escape did not stop at that edition of thirty thousand copies. It was fifty thousand before another month had passed. Its English success was being followed in the United States. American film companies were already competing for the "talking" rights, and one of them had offered a price which seemed fantastic to Brandon, when forwarded by his literary agent. It looked bigger in dollars than in pounds. When he looked at that row of o's after the dollar sign and the figure three, it seemed to him that these golden offers were becoming astronomical in their arithmetic. They were figures beyond his sense of values. He had scraped along very comfortably on three hundred a year, with hopes of an extra hundred or so for occasional luxuries. What he should do with all the money that was likely to come to him in royalties from both sides of the Atlantic was a baffling problem which he did not attempt to solve. Willowbrook Cottage was good enough for him as a dwelling place. He didn't want to change it for another habitation with larger rooms or more rooms in which he would feel lonely. He couldn't smoke himself sick on American dollars or overeat himself on rich food because his bank balance was piling up. He hated the expensive toys of the world.

He preferred walking on his flat feet, as Foster called it, to driving about in a Daimler or a Rolls-Royce—not that he had ever driven such costly chariots. When he made an occasional jaunt to London he spent one-and-eight pence on his lunch in a Chelsea tea shop, or three-and-sixpence in a Soho restaurant, or one-and-tuppence in an A. B. C, and found himself more at ease than he would have been at the Carlton, the Ritz, or the Savoy grillroom. He was no fop. His trousers were baggy at the knees. He liked them baggy at the knees. Nothing would induce him to look like a tailor's dummy. He had no collecting instinct. He kept a few books, not for their

bindings or their value as first editions, but because he liked to read them. He had no wish to play the country gentleman or the man about town. He had shirked the social round and fled from the crowd. He was a solitary bird, shunning the club and the cocktail bar and the bridge table, so that he might walk in quiet glades and think out his own ideas on lonely heaths. He liked humanity and wrote about it, but always he had been a looker-on, the silent man in the corner, the shy boy at school. Even in the trenches he had been "solitary minded," like Siegfried Sassoon. Now this success that had come to him, staggering and overwhelming in relation to his previous poverty, threatened to make him ridiculous.

The knowledge that he was no longer a poor man, according to his own standards, and the measure of this success which had come to him with a bumper crop, was gradual in its revelation after the first shock of surprise. That is to say, it took some time for all its implications to reach his imagination.

A visit from his literary agent gave him a closer understanding of his change of fortune. The mere fact that this busy young gentleman who handled the work of many successful authors—deducting ten per cent of their earnings—should take the time and trouble to drive down to Willowbrook Cottage was in itself a proof of new importance. Many times Brandon had been kept waiting in his anteroom, where a friendly girl behind a typewriter had assured him that Mr. Keane was very busy and likely to keep him waiting some time. Elegant young women who showed their knees very freely and used their lipsticks without self-consciousness, preceded him into the room where Mr. Keane arranged their contracts for future work and discussed their plots with a keen sense of the literary market.

The girl behind the typewriter revealed the identity of these visitors, now and then.

"That's Phœbe Valentine, the author of *Shipwreck*. It's in its sixtieth thousand. I can't think why!"

"That was Violet Middlemarch who wrote *Its Fleece Was White as Snow*. Banned by the libraries, you remember? She gets big prices in America now. I can't say I like her stuff. Too sexy!"

Francis Brandon had waited humbly while these successful rivals had gone before him. He had listened to their laughter from the inner room, and to Keane's voice chatting to these profitable clients. His own stuff was hawked about. Ten publishers had refused that novel *The Secret Life* before Keane had placed it with a new firm who took it because they were promised a novel by an important author.

Now Keane drove down to Surrey in his two-seater Renault and was effusive when he was shown up to Brandon's study by Mrs. Narracott.

"I thought I would save you a journey to town, my dear Brandon. What a charming little place this is! But rather small, don't you think, for such a distinguished author?"

He laughed and showed his teeth under a little black moustache. Then he glanced round the bare room—it was uncarpeted—and looked at the very old suit Brandon was wearing. He had worn it for gardening and rough work. It would have looked well on a scarecrow.

"My dear fellow," he said good-naturedly, and almost emotionally, "I really must congratulate you on your fine success. Phenomenal. There's been nothing like it since *If Winter Comes*. No need for financial anxiety now. You can turn your back on Grub Street. I'm proud to think that I always believed in your work."

Brandon seemed to remember that Keane had been rather discouraging at times. He remembered a conversation in which his literary agent had advised him to get more plot into his stories and to try his hand at a detective novel, something that the public could read without worrying about "soul stuff."

"People are dippy about *The Way of Escape*," he said. "My wife cried over it—and that's a pretty good test of quality, I can tell you. She reviews eight novels a week for the *Lady's Boudoir*. Sometimes the sight of a new novel makes her want to scream. The fact is, old man, you've got under their skins, somehow. It's a reaction against all this neurotic stuff we've been having lately. You haven't been afraid of simplicity and old-fashioned character study. The real thing! I'm advising my authors that the game is up for sex and self-analysis. It's a swing-back to decency and restrained realism and the healthy humour of everyday life. Very interesting. These cycles always happen. You've started the new curve back to Dickens, back to Balzac, back to Trollope, with a modern touch."

"I wrote what came into my head," said Brandon.

"Well, I hope you've got a lot more of the same kind in the same place. Follow your own line, my dear Brandon. Don't be afraid of repeating a good model. We can leave *The Way of Escape* to take care of itself. It's doing great things. The provinces are sending repeat orders by every post. America has chosen it for the Book of the Month Club. Very big figures. You'll be surprised. Have a look at these lists."

Brandon was surprised. The figures were staggering to a man whose most successful novel before this time had not touched two thousand copies.

"What I'm thinking about is your next book," said the literary agent. "We must concentrate on that. I'm thinking of arranging a contract for you with Halloway, and they've got to pay for the privilege—a big sum in advance of royalties."

He mentioned the sum, and Brandon blanched.

"It's robbery," he said. "I don't want as much as that. Nothing that I write will ever be worth it. The whole thing is absurd. It makes me feel like a blood-sucking swindler."

He spoke irritably, and Anthony Keane, literary agent, looked at him sharply and then burst into laughter.

"You amuse me! Most of my authors curse me because I can't get bigger royalties. You look like a bear with a sore head because I'm safeguarding your interests and seeing that you get your market price."

"Confound my market price!" said Brandon. "I'm not a money-making machine. I don't want my books boosted like patent medicines."

Anthony Keane looked startled. Such sentiments were unfamiliar to him. They seemed to him extremely ridiculous. He wondered if Brandon had been unhinged by the shock of success.

"What do you write 'em for?" he asked. "As a relief to your inhibitions? As waste paper for fishmongers? As a treat to your highbrow friends?"

Brandon paced up and down his room once or twice before answering.

"Look here, Keane," he said, laughing nervously, "I'm knocked edgewise by this success of mine! Of course, I'm glad of it in a way. It's damned marvellous. An author wants to get a big public. He wants to be read. And I'm not indifferent to the money side of things. I can do with a bit. I don't put on any pose about that. But this is too much of a good thing. It's disturbing. It's embarrassing. It's going to interfere with my peace of mind. I'm perfectly content with a quiet life in this old cottage. What in the world am I going to do with all this superfluous wealth?"

"My dear chap," said Keane good-naturedly. "You talk as though you were piling up millions. At most it comes to a few thousands."

"I've never thought in thousands," said Brandon. "I don't know what they mean."

"Precious little," said Anthony Keane. "I should hate to tell you my domestic expenses in a flat at Knightsbridge. Nothing luxurious, mind you.

My wife and I live the simple life. Three servants and a two-seater car. The usual entertainment. Money goes nowhere nowadays. You'll need more than you can earn when the income tax has done with you, I warn you."

He calmed down the nerves of his client, staggered by sudden success, afraid of this new notoriety, so shy and shrinking, and shabby, and solitary.

Mr. Keane talked "shop" again and discussed a few details of necessary publicity.

"I want to get you photographed. People want to know what the author of *The Way of Escape* looks like when he's at home."

"They won't like it when they know," growled Brandon.

Keane smiled and hoped secretly that his client would get a decent suit of clothes and pull his tie up straight.

"I'll send a man down," he said. "Then the Press people want to interview you. I've had many requests. Could you see a lady from the *Queen* next week?"

Brandon groaned.

"Can't you spare me that kind of nonsense?"

"One other thing," said Anthony Keane. "The Booksellers' Association want you to address their salesmen at their annual dinner in October. It would be a very good thing for your next novel."

"I would rather be boiled in oil," said Brandon.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I've accepted on your behalf," remarked Mr. Keane thoughtfully. "I can hardly get out of it now."

He stayed to lunch and was polite to Mrs. Brandon, and was humorous with his client at the wheel of the two-seater Renault.

"For a best seller you look thoroughly dejected! You must take a service flat in town. I can give you the name of a good tailor in Savile Row. Why not a month or two on the Riviera—where all best sellers go?"

He had known Brandon long enough to pull his leg a little. And Brandon didn't like having his leg pulled. And that title of "best seller" irritated him. Lydia Beaumont and her clique had used it as their greatest insult to authors for whose work they had a pitiful contempt. What would they have to say about it now that they had forced him into that much abused position?

It was ironical that success had come to him too late for any supreme satisfaction of unfulfilled dreams. If it had happened a few months ago he might have asked Pearl Jerningham to share something better than a roof which belonged mostly to his mother. Instead of love in a cottage he might

have suggested love in a service flat somewhere in Knightsbridge, with occasional jaunts to places she liked. It might have made a difference. At least he could afford to keep a wife now—when Pearl was going to marry Cyril Chantry of Yeoman's Farm. He could pay a bit more for a wedding present. "Among the gifts to the bride . . ."

30

In the village of Harley Green there was no immediate awareness of a change in the fortune of the shabby young man in the cottage up the lane. He still wore the same clothes, which looked as though he had slept in them. He still sloped down to the village stores for penny packets of "pipe cleaners" and matches, and bootlaces, and other small needs. He did not increase his weekly ration of smoking mixture, or suddenly appear in purple and fine linen, or startle the neighbourhood by descending from a Rolls-Royce. Even the Avenels and the Jerninghams were unaware of any pecuniary difference in the affairs of their neighbour, although they knew that his book had been well reviewed—Audrey told them that—and saw his name among the advertisements in the Sunday papers.

Audrey was the only one who became excited about it. She had bought a copy for herself but had given it away to her aunt in London, because of the presentation copy with "Love from the author" which Brandon had taken round according to promise. She read it late into the night, like some of its reviewers—unless they lied—and annoyed her father by keeping the lights burning until nearly three down in his study where he had left her hours ago with a warning that it was time for bed. Being a light sleeper, he became aware of someone downstairs poking up the fire. In his dressing gown he went down to explore, suspecting burglars, as usual, and discovered Audrey hunched up in his big leather armchair with a lamp on a little table by her side and a book on her lap.

"Audrey!" he exclaimed angrily, "what on earth are you doing at this hour? It's nearly three o'clock. Haven't you girls *any* sense of discipline?"

"Sorry, Father," said Audrey. "I've been reading Mr. Brandon's book. It's simply marvellous."

She had wet eyes because of that doctor's tragedy, which had moved her deeply.

Colonel Avenel switched off the electric light except the lamp on the little table.

"I've asked you so many times to be careful of the light," he said severely. "It costs money, you know. If you had to pay the bills . . ."

"Father," said Audrey, "you really ought to read this novel. It's thrilling. It helps one to understand things. It makes one pity people who have to struggle and scrape to make both ends meet, always on the edge of a precipice—unemployment and all that."

Colonel Avenel had been wakened from his sleep. Not a bad-tempered man as a rule, though inclined to be irritable, he was in no mood for literary conversation.

"I have to struggle and scrape myself. And I'm being ruined to pay for lazy people who won't work. And I wish to goodness, Audrey, that you would set an example of decency and discipline in this house where there is nothing but disorderly behaviour, gross disobedience, and moral laxity. Nobody pays the slightest attention to what I say. I can't even get a night's rest. My own daughters defy me. I'm extremely angry."

"I'm sorry, Father," said Audrey; "but we're not children, you know. If I can't read a good book when I want to, it's time I cleared out and set up in a bed-sitting room somewhere."

It was a familiar threat. Sylvia used it three times a week in moments of domestic stress.

Colonel Avenel groaned, and the Adam's apple in his thin neck moved as though he were swallowing his temper with great difficulty.

"Don't talk nonsense!" he said sharply. "Come to bed, Audrey. Sylvia worries me quite enough with her wild behaviour. I rely on you for a little common sense."

Audrey described this scene to Brandon. She thought he would like to know that she had got into a row because his novel had made her forget the flight of time. She assured him that it was a masterpiece. She had had no idea that Harley Green was entertaining an angel unawares.

"Seriously," she said, "I think it's marvellous, Frank. If I were a man I should take off my hat to you. As a mere maiden I drop a curtsey to you."

Her frock did not fall below her knees, but she made a very good pretense of curtseying before him like a lady in a crinoline.

"I'm glad it amused you," he told her.

He was genuinely surprised that she should be interested in his low-class characters and pictures of mean streets in London—beyond her range of social knowledge. He lacked the key to the mystery of his own success. Why should the public like this book when they had failed to like his previous novels? What quality did it have which he had not put into the others? He tried to get a clue from Audrey Avenel, who was intelligent and a great novel reader, and yet in a way unsophisticated.

"One feels it's true," she told him. "There's no fake about it. Your people step out of the pages perfectly alive. Then one likes your doctor. It's nice to think that such men live nowadays, here and there. Where did you find him?"

"It was my father," said Brandon. "Slightly altered, of course, with a different story attached to him."

Audrey remarked that it seemed to have made a hit, judging from the reviews she had seen and the big advertisements. She ventured to suggest that he might like to celebrate the event by a little dinner in town with a lady friend and possibly two seats in the upper circle. She left out the name of the lady.

"Why not stalls?" asked Brandon recklessly. It came to him as a shock that he could well afford stalls in which he had only sat once or twice on complimentary tickets to "dud" shows.

"Hush!" exclaimed Audrey. "If you talk like that I shall think you have become a best seller, like dear old Edgar Wallace, who drinks a bottle of champagne without blinking, I'm told."

He hadn't the face to tell her that that was exactly what had happened! It was a dark secret which made him feel like a criminal concealing his infamy in respectable society.

"If you go on like this," said Audrey, "you'll be wanting a lady secretary. Don't all successful novelists employ golden-haired ladies to type their manuscripts and correct their spelling? May I hope that you'll give me a chance? My hair is not golden, that's true, but I'm one of the blondes whom gentlemen are supposed to prefer, according to legend."

Brandon laughed, but hurriedly excused himself from accepting the kind offer.

"I should be paralyzed if I had to dictate to a lady waiting for my words. I can't imagine anything more frightful or embarrassing."

"You'd get used to it," said Audrey. "Men get used to their wives in far more embarrassing situations. It's all a question of habit."

She held out her hand to him—they had been talking across his garden wall—and spoke a few words of congratulation, simply and sincerely.

"I'm so glad. It looks like a real success. I liked it tremendously. The best of luck."

"We'll have that dinner in town," he promised, "and two stalls at His Majesty's."

She shook her head.

"I didn't crawl round to cadge a free meal. Love to Mrs. Brandon."

She strode away with her golf bag slung over her shoulder, and he watched her until she swung round the end of the lane. He was glad this girl liked his novel. It was good of her to come and tell him. If ever he wanted to write about the modern girl of her type and caste, he would take her for his model—her sense of humour, her frankness, her level-headedness.

There was only one other person in Harley Green who read his book before it reached a cheap edition. It was Pearl Jerningham, whose opinion he wanted to know. He had sent her a copy without an inscription, and he knew that she was reading it, because her father came round one evening and after one of his monologues remarked casually that Pearl was deep in his book. He hoped Brandon would excuse him for not tackling it, but he seldom read modern novels, finding his pleasure in Jane Austen and the old masters like Fielding and Smollett.

"I can't bear the modern young women of fiction with their complexes and their inhibitions and their weak little love affairs," he said. "Dear Jane had an admirable sense of humour and a sturdy common sense. As for these modern war books by shell-shocked men, I prefer to leave them alone. They're exponents of the Blue Funk School."

Brandon disagreed with him. He didn't care for their blasphemy and their overemphasis of filthy episodes, but he thought it was a good thing for the younger generation to know what war with modern weapons was like.

"It won't stop them fighting," said Mr. Jerningham. "Man is a fighting animal. A deplorable fact, no doubt, but there it is. The League of Nations is an illusion. These peace pacts have no more power than brown paper pasted over the cracks of a jerry-built house, quite useless when there's another explosion of racial passion. Peace is just a breathing space between war. Time to lick one's wounds."

Brandon argued with him, but at the back of his head there was the thought that Pearl was deep in his book. He wondered what she thought of it.

In spite of his indifference to the financial side of success—at least he refused to get excited about it—he always had a thrill when he thought of people reading his novel, those unknown readers whose minds were being touched by the creatures of his own brain, by thoughts which he had tapped onto a typewriter in lonely hours, by words of his which had somehow come alive, and took part of his own spirit into other people's houses: into tube trains where girls read on their journeys home, into rooms where they shut out the world for a while and lived with his imaginary characters, finding them perhaps more real than the next-door neighbours, knowing them with greater intimacy, seeing into their souls. That, after all, was a novelist's reward, wonderful and warming, if it happened, apart from all royalties. Now Pearl was reading his book. Something of his mind would creep into hers. For a few hours now and then his spirit would be alone with her. It would be like a long monologue in which he talked to her without interruption, not even a mocking word. He wondered what chapter she was reading now—what page she had reached. Of course, he had given himself away in this book, as an author always must give himself away if he is writing stuff which he has lived. She would know how his mind worked. He couldn't wear a mask or hide himself when she had his book in her hands.

It was in his room one night when she came down to fetch her father home that she referred to his novel. His mother had gone up to bed, not expecting this visit, and weary of Mr. Jerningham's eloquence on the subject of eighteenth-century music.

Then Pearl came in her fur cloak, with a laughing rebuke to her father for staying so long. She had just come down from Yeoman's Farm.

"You're wearing out the boards in front of the hearth," she told him. "And you're wearing out the patience of a good-natured man. Why do the Jerninghams talk so much? We're the most talkative family in England. We love to hear the sound of our own voices."

"I'm a very good listener, my dear," said Mr. Jerningham humbly and untruthfully.

It was ten minutes before Pearl mentioned the novel she had been reading. Then she referred to it.

"I've been reading a novel called *The Way of Escape*. I've forgotten the author's name. Do you happen to know?"

"Bramshaw or Blangdon," he suggested.

"Yes, Blangdon, perhaps. Something like that!"

She laughed because he had played up to her joke.

"My dear," she said. "It depressed me beyond words. The squalor of it soaked into my spirit like a London fog. Those poor drab lives—that heroism in mean streets—that comedy in tenements, that tragedy of self-sacrifice—how awful! If such lives are lived I don't want to know about them. Give me the merry jests of P. G. Wodehouse, or the romantic drama of Ethel M. Dell."

"I'm sorry it bored you," said Brandon.

He tried to hide his disappointment and failed, so that she saw he was hurt.

"It's not the fault of the novel," she assured him quickly. "It's the fault of me—my frivolous mind, my dislike of martyrdom. Your self-sacrificing doctor was a rebuke to my belief in having a good time at all costs. I don't like being rebuked. I detest asceticism. I am eager for self-indulgence. Sorry!"

Mr. Jerningham laughed at this declaration of faith.

"Pearl, my poppet, don't confess your sinfulness in such a brazen way. You're alarming our literary friend. He'll put you in his next novel as the Scarlet Woman."

"No," said Pearl, "I'm appearing as *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* of Harley Green, Surrey."

"It's a good idea," said Brandon. "If I could put you into a book as well as Val Foster has put you onto canvas it would sell like hot cakes."

He looked at her as she stood there in his room, her face flushed after a walk through frosty air, with the collar of her fur cloak tucked up to her ears. Romney's Lady Hamilton again. She ought to have carried a little muff like that beauty of the eighteenth century. No novelist, not himself, certainly, could put her into his pages: the hidden laughter in her eyes, her elusive smile, the colour of her bronze-gold hair below her felt hat.

She saw the homage in his look and for a moment was self-conscious.

"Time, gentlemen, please!" she cried, grabbing her father's arm. "We mustn't stay here all night talking nonsense."

At the gate she held up a lantern which she had brought for this walk down a dark lane, and by the light of it Brandon saw that she kissed her hand to him.

It was a pity that his luck had come too late. As the author of a "best seller" he might have had a better chance.

Up at Yeoman's Farm her future husband was having some alterations done, making the house ready for his bride. So he heard from Mrs. Narracott, who knew all the local news.

31

Pearl Jerningham was not much seen in Harley Green for some weeks after that evening visit to Brandon's cottage. He heard news of her from the Avenels. She was staying with an aunt in town, to the great advantage of the modistes and milliners of Beauchamp Place, who were preparing her trousseau.

"It's lucky she's going to marry a rich man," remarked Audrey. "She's a costly young woman when she goes to get married. But I must say she's enjoying herself. She showed me some of her frocks yesterday, and my eyes nearly popped out of my head with envy and admiration. They're too feminine for me, though. I couldn't live up to their languorous lines."

Sylvia and Audrey were to be her bridesmaids. They, too, were getting excited about frocks, while their father was getting anxious about the inevitable bills. He thought a quiet wedding was more suitable to a time of trade depression and advancing unemployment. He made a protest to that effect when Pearl Jerningham's photograph appeared full page in the *Tatler* with the announcement that her marriage to Mr. Cyril Chantry, the well known financier, would be a great social event.

"Very foolish, all that," said Colonel Avenel. "If you and Audrey appear as bridesmaids, it will give people the impression that I'm a man of wealth, instead of trying to sell a bit of land to pay for income tax."

"I don't suppose it will excite the tax collectors to grab more than the law allows, Father," said Audrey soothingly.

Brandon overheard these conversations now and then at the Avenels' house. He heard also the point of view of Mr. Jerningham, who continued his habit of dropping in for a quiet chat.

"There's no holding Pearl," he said. "She sees red, blue, and pink when she gets among the milliners. I hope my future son-in-law will reconstitute my bank balance one of these days, if I have to settle up for Pearl's wedding expenses. Alarming, my dear sir! Positively terrifying, in my destitute condition."

The date of the wedding was fixed for the fifteenth of November. The honeymoon was to be in Italy. Mr. Jerningham was going off on his own to Monaco. He would feel damnably hipped, he said, without dear old Pearl, who had been a good scout. All the same, he was glad of her luck. She deserved what was coming to her. She had been patient with poverty—at least, she had played the game—and now she need no longer deny herself the little luxuries which her poverty-stricken father had never been able to give her since the war—which had knocked him edgewise, financially, because of bad investments in France as well as England.

"I hope she'll be happy," he remarked more than once. "Chantry's not a bad fellow. He's not uncivilized. And he's devoted to Pearl. . . . But there's something a bit odd about him. Nerves, I expect. He's getting worried about the industrial depression. Well, I don't wonder. Those trade returns published in *The Times* are positively tragic."

It is possible that the trade returns published in *The Times* had something to do with a tragedy which happened at Harley Green, not without important influence on the life of Francis Brandon and other people in that village. It came crashing into the quietude of that place cut off from the noisy world by heath and woodland beyond the outposts of London and its fevered life. It brought the characters of melodrama into this rural scene—detectives, policemen, reporters, photographers, and a gaping, whispering, sensation-seeking mob who came on motor cycles and push bikes from neighbouring villages, and even from London. Brandon, as a novelist, would never have used such a strain of melodrama. His imagination would have rejected it as a brutal and violent interruption of quiet character study and the normal way of life. Such cases appeared from time to time in the newspaper he read, but they seemed to him outside the experience of ordinary people, and certainly outside his own interpretation of life. He left such things to novelists who could handle such a tragedy as this.

He came face to face with it in a wood above Yeoman's Farm at four o'clock on a November afternoon when a bare sun went down below the hills and glowed through the smooth trunks of those giant beeches where on a summer day he had sat with Pearl Jerningham talking merry nonsense. The dead leaves were crisp beneath his feet. A white mist was stealing up from the valley. Below him on his right hand he could see the tall chimneys of Yeoman's Farm from which smoke was rising in bluish wisps against the dark fir trees which sheltered the house from the east winds. The lamps were being lit. The windows glowed with yellow light, suggesting cosy rooms within and warm kitchens and tea-time. He would have to go back to tea

himself. In another half hour it would be quite dark. Someone was hammering on an anvil in one of Chantry's workshops. The clock over his stables struck four, and the notes were clear and thin in this wood above his house. It was Chantry's wood, with a right of way striking towards Sussex. A few rabbits scuttled away from Brandon as he walked. He rattled his stick in the undergrowth to startle a little beggar who had hopped in that way. He went on a few yards farther and then came to a dead halt. Something was lying across the path. It was the figure of a man lying sideways in a queer twisted attitude.

A gipsy asleep? . . . A drunken tramp? . . .

Somehow Brandon did not believe in either of those ideas which came into his mind at the sight of that figure. For some reason his mind jerked back to a war in which he had been, and to No Man's Land, where he had crawled sometimes under shell fire. He had seen men lying like that, sideways and twisted. They were dead men. He had always been afraid of them, not looking at them more than he could help. He was afraid now. This figure in front of him was dead like those others. He hated to go near it. But he went near, and stooped down and peered at a face there in this twilight of a November day. It was the face of Cyril Chantry whom Pearl was going to marry. But it was a dead face, with a wound on one side of the head, so that the leaves on which it lay were wet with blood. A short, stumpy pistol was lying near the body, as though it had been dropped when the man fell.

Brandon did not utter a sound. He did not cry out, "My God!" though those words came to him soundlessly.

He stood up and knew that he was trembling a little. He knew that his hands had gone cold. He felt his heart give a kind of knock against his ribs. Presently he started to run, not very quickly, but faster than walking, and foolishly, because he stumbled down the hillside and once caught his foot in a loose root and went sprawling until he seized an overhanging branch and steadied himself. It would have been easier going to take the longer way to Yeoman's Farm by the public footpath, but he struck straight down to the road, tearing his clothes on some barbed wire.

In the stables of Yeoman's Farm a dog barked at the sound of his approach and became excited when he walked through the gates and up the drive. At the front door under the centre gable he pulled an iron chain, and an old bell gave tongue in the hall beyond.

Standing there on the threshold of this farmhouse, Brandon became overwhelmed by the appalling tragedy which had happened. The master of this house was dead up there on the hillside. Pearl Jerningham would never

go to her wedding. All her hopes and happiness had been struck down. He was a messenger of doom at the door of this house where the windows gleamed with a friendly welcome. A maid was laughing somewhere. Footsteps came briskly across the stone floor. The door was flung open, letting out a flood of light. Chantry's butler stood there, a portly and comfortable figure. He recognized Brandon as having been at dinner one night, and said, "Good-afternoon, sir," with a slightly patronizing geniality, knowing perhaps that Brandon was only a literary gentleman from the cottage down the lane.

He expected Brandon to say something—to ask the usual question, "Is Mr. Chantry at home?" and was surprised at the silence of this man who stood at the door. Brandon was incapable of speech for a moment, though his lips moved, and the butler stared at him curiously, seeing the dead pallor of his face and the tragic look in his eyes.

"The master's out. I expect him back to tea. Won't you come in, sir?"

Brandon was breathing heavily, like a man who has run himself all out, but he managed to speak jerkily.

"Something dreadful has happened. . . . Your master is shot. He's lying in the woods up there . . . the avenue of beeches. . . . He is dead."

The butler staggered back as though Brandon had stabbed him.

"Dead? . . . Good God! Who says so?"

"I found him," said Brandon. "It may have been an accident."

The butler's ruddy face had changed to muddy gray. All his pomposity had oozed from him, and he had lost his professional manner and lurched up against the doorpost as though drunk.

"What the 'ell are you talking about?" he shouted. "Why, the governor left me less than an hour ago. 'Miss Jerningham's coming to tea,' he said. 'I've left a note for her in case I'm late,' he said. . . . Dead? . . ."

The loose flesh in his face sagged. His plump hands went up to his head. His breath came in gasps.

Brandon had once been an officer in war-time. Something of his old training reasserted itself in his subconsciousness. He found himself giving commands to Chantry's butler in a sharp, rasping voice.

"Pull yourself together, man. Fetch some of the other men. We can't leave him lying up there."

Later he led the way up to the place in the wood where Mr. Cyril Chantry lay sideways and twisted. It was dark then, and they had to use

lanterns. Brandon will never forget that scene with the dark figures of Chantry's servants stooping over the body of their master while a lantern here and there gleamed on the smooth trunks of the beech trees and wavered in the undergrowth, silvering its leaves. The village constable arrived on a bicycle. Somehow he had heard. Two farm labourers coming home from their work joined the group and spoke low to each other in the Sussex speech.

They carried Chantry's body home down the hillside on one of his farm gates, torn from its hinges. He was a heavy man, and the soft earth, deep in leaf mould, yielded under their feet as they trudged down the steep track, so that several times they stumbled and nearly fell. The butler cursed them for their clumsiness, swore foul oaths at them. He was beside himself with emotion and terror. Brandon spoke to him sternly.

"Stop it, man," he said. "Control yourself, can't you?"

The hall door was wide open when they reached Yeoman's Farm again. A crowd of servants stood in the courtyard, stable hands and gardeners and the kitchen staff. Some of them groaned when the body of their master was carried past, and one of the maids hid her head in her apron and wailed. Chantry had been a good master to them, it seemed, generous and easy-going. In the presence of his dead body they were awed and frightened.

Looking back on this tragic episode which had come into his own quiet plot of life, Brandon was astonished that he had taken command instinctively and that everyone looked to him for orders. He had disliked this man Chantry for his capture of Pearl Jerningham. He had only been once before into this old farmhouse, a guest at Chantry's dinner table. Now he was ordering his servants about, making free with his house, acting as host to this dead man. It was by Brandon's order that the body was laid on the hall floor and that a blanket was brought to cover it until the doctor came—a doctor from Guildford who was late in coming after a telephone message which Brandon sent.

Several servants lingered round the open door leading into the old hall, with its plaster walls and old beams, upon which a ruddy light flickered from the flames in a log fire burning in the big hearthplace with its iron dogs and brass-bound bellows. They stared dazed and horrified at that blanketed figure lying on the stone floor, who, less than an hour ago, had been a living man and perhaps had spoken to them as he passed by. Suddenly there was a movement among them, and one of the women servants began to sob.

Brandon heard a voice on the steps outside, gay, and yet faintly surprised, and perhaps, after a moment, vaguely alarmed.

“Hullo, everybody! What’s happened? A fire or something?”

It was Pearl Jerningham, who had come to tea at Yeoman’s Farm.

Brandon was standing by Chantry’s body. He went very quickly to the door and stood between Pearl and that thing lying on the floor of the hall.

“Don’t come in,” he said. “Something terrible has happened.”

Pearl echoed his words, not frightened yet, but wondering.

“Something terrible? Is anyone hurt? Can’t I help?”

“Don’t come in,” said Brandon again. “You had better go away, Pearl. I daren’t tell you.”

She looked at his haggard face and saw something in his eyes which frightened her then.

“What’s the matter?” she asked sharply. “Has something happened to Mr. Chantry? Tell me, Frank.”

Brandon clenched his hands behind his back. He hated to take the joy out of her life.

“A terrible accident,” he said. “You will have to be brave.”

“I am brave,” she answered with a kind of impatience. “Tell me the worst. Do not keep me standing outside like this. Haven’t I a right to know?”

He was tempted to bar her way by stretching his arms out so that she couldn’t pass. He wanted to spare her the look of that body. But there was a look on her face which made him step aside. It was a kind of tragic courage and pride. She passed him and went quickly forward a pace or two, and then stopped at the sight of that stiff form on the stone floor.

“Is he dead?” she asked in a low voice.

“Oh, miss!” said the butler, who was kneeling on the stone floor. “Don’t look at him, for God’s sake, miss.”

She stooped and drew the blanket back and saw the face of the man who had been her lover. Their wedding had been a week away.

The blanket slipped from her fingers. She put the back of her hand against her forehead, and shut her eyes. There was no colour at all in her face or lips, and she made no sound until presently she wept. It was Brandon who led her away to another room.

“Oh, Frank!” she said presently. “Was it an accident? How did it happen? It’s only a week before our marriage. That wedding of mine—all my hopes—all my vanities. Dead!”

She broke down and again wept, but whether with self-pity or grief for a dead lover no one can say, because such things are hidden in human consciousness.

32

THE character of that dead man, the secrets and mystery of his mind, do not come into this book. Brandon had only seen him three or four times and had been to his house only once. It was after his death that he knew more about him, the business he did, his reputation in the city, the drama of his career, the risks he took. All that was written at great length in the newspapers with sensational headlines. His death shook the Stock Exchange, it seemed. The shares of all his companies slumped heavily, and many people lost their money. He had played a gambler's game for big stakes. He was beaten because of events outside his reckoning and beyond the control or prophecy of expert minds—the sudden crash in Wall Street with its inevitable reactions in Europe, overproduction of raw material in Canada and the Argentine, a wave of pessimism in England, due to high taxation and unemployment, and, more immediately, the colossal frauds of a great financial swindler. There is no suggestion that Chantry was also a criminal. At least, that deduction is not justified by the inquiry into his affairs, although undoubtedly he was skating on thin ice and taking chances on the borderline of honesty. He was immoral but not legally criminal in using his reputation to establish confidence among small investors ignorant of the hazardous way in which he was manipulating their money. All that is technical, complicated, and now uninteresting, except in relation to the private lives of people who were involved in his downfall and death, and particularly those two people of whom I am writing in this book, Francis Brandon and Pearl Jerningham.

Both of them were witnesses at the inquest which was held in the neighbouring town, where a crowd had gathered outside the hall.

Brandon, called early to the witness box, had to tell of his finding the body, and was sharply reprimanded for disturbing it before medical examination.

The coroner seemed to have a grudge against him. There were heated passages between them, though Brandon desired only to tell his story and have done with it. There were moments when he was staggered by the

suggestion that he was under suspicion. Some of the questions put to him were disconcerting and seemed to accuse him of giving false evidence, though he had told the plain truth simply. Perhaps it was his nervous manner—he found himself stammering once or twice—and the haggard lines of his face which created a bad impression upon the coroner, searching for sinister facts or in a querulous state of mind.

"How is it, Mr. Brandon," asked the coroner, "that you assumed immediately that the deceased gentleman committed suicide?"

"I didn't assume it," said Brandon.

"Mr. Chantry's butler said in evidence that you told him his master had shot himself."

"No," said Brandon. "I said, 'Your master is shot.' "

The coroner adjusted his pince-nez and turned back to the evidence.

"These are the butler's words: '*Mr. Brandon stood at the hall door very pale and haggard. He said, "Something terrible has happened. Your master has shot himself.*" ' "

"I deny that," said Brandon. "It is easy to forget exact words in a moment like that."

"I suggest that you forget your own words, sir."

"Possibly," said Brandon. "But I don't think so."

"I don't want to know what you think, Mr. Brandon. I want to know what you said. Kindly answer my question. Did you or did you not say 'Your master has shot himself'?"

"I did not," said Brandon.

The coroner sighed heavily and pushed his papers about as though dealing with an unsatisfactory witness—a man who was endeavouring to conceal the truth.

"Kindly tell me why you were in such a hurry to remove the body from the place where you found it?"

"It was the decent thing to do," said Brandon. "Darkness was coming on. I wanted to get him back to his own house."

The coroner glanced at him sharply through his drooping pince-nez.

"You were very much upset, Mr. Brandon?"

"Startled and horrified," said Brandon quietly.

"Hysterical, perhaps?"

"Not at all. I had seen death before."

"That kind of death?"

"Yes."

The coroner raised his eyebrows.

"It was nothing new to you to find a man—a friend of yours—lying dead in a wood? Isn't that a strange statement to make?"

"I was in the war," said Brandon.

The coroner paused in his questioning, made a few notes rapidly, as though the fact that Brandon had been in the war counted against him and was gravely suspicious.

Then he looked at him over his glasses and asked a question which seemed to have a sinister significance.

"What were your relations with the deceased?"

"I dined at his house once. I hardly knew him."

"You had no quarrel with him?"

"None whatever."

"There was no jealousy between you with regard to any particular lady? I am bound to put that question."

Brandon's face flushed angrily. It was an outrageous question. Had those detectives who had been prowling round Harley Green picked up any village gossip about Pearl Jerningham and himself—their walks together in the summer, their friendship?

"I consider that question impertinent and disgraceful," said Brandon hotly.

The coroner made an impatient gesture and spoke with an icy edge to his voice.

"I must ask you to answer my question, sir. For your own sake, I advise you to control yourself. I repeat the question I have asked you."

He repeated it.

For a moment Brandon glared at him as though wishing to smash his face.

"Certainly not," he answered harshly.

The coroner tightened his lips and scribbled a note.

"I may have to question witnesses on that point. You may stand down, sir."

Brandon resumed his seat among the other witnesses—Mr. Chantry's butler, his valet, the farm labourers who had helped to carry down his body, his private secretary from London, several city men who had been directors of his companies, the village constable, the doctor from Guildford, and—at the end of the bench, to the right of Brandon—Pearl and her father.

Brandon sat rigid in his seat. He had been examined by the coroner as though he had murdered Chantry or was under the gravest suspicion. He was convinced that some of the village folk in court were staring at him as though they were already convinced of his guilt. It was too utterly absurd. Brandon cursed all coroners who had such unlimited powers in the examination of witnesses and made the most of any case before them to get newspaper notoriety. The reporters were busy there in the Press box, scribbling down the evidence. He caught the eyes of one of them fastened on him with a smile of recognition. He remembered the fellow's face vaguely. He must have met him during his own spell in Fleet Street before he gave up journalism for novel writing. The young man raised his fountain pen and winked.

Brandon felt slightly reassured. He wouldn't have received this friendly wink from a former colleague if he had made a fool of himself in the witness box. He listened to the other evidence and once shifted his position so that he could glance sideways at Pearl Jerningham. She was dressed in black and looked pale and ill and beautiful. In this bare room into which the November fog had crept, blurring the lights, she looked like a drooping lily, he thought. Their eyes met for a moment, and she smiled at him faintly across the room.

Most of the evidence seemed unnecessary and irrelevant.

The butler, who was called again, was a godsend to the reporters, who were looking for a little comic relief and put "loud laughter" after some of his answers. In his black tail coat, buttoned over his portly stomach, he assumed a dignity and a pomposity which refused to be broken down by the coroner's impatient questioning. He had gone to pieces when he had heard of his master's death. Now he had become the perfect butler again.

"You said your master looked upset on the morning of his death."

The butler raised his plump hand with a deprecating gesture.

"Pardon me, sir, I said Mr. Chantry appeared slightly happrehensive."

"What exactly do you mean by 'apprehensive'?"

"Strictly according to its meaning, sir. That is to say, huneasy and hanticipatory of hunpleasant news."

"In other words 'upset,' " said the coroner, tightening his lips again.

The valet, who was a thin-faced man with side whiskers, gave evidence that his master had complained of headaches and seemed depressed for some time. The valet recollected that Mr. Chantry had been rung up on the telephone after breakfast and seemed disheartened by the message he received. It was a conversation about financial matters.

"How do you know that?" asked the coroner sharply.

The valet hesitated for a moment before he answered, and passed a finger over his lips which he moistened with the tip of his tongue.

"I owned a few shares in some of Mr. Chantry's companies. I don't mind admitting I was getting a bit anxious about them. Most of my savings, worse luck."

"So you listened to your master's private conversation?" said the coroner sternly.

The valet moistened his lips again.

"I couldn't make out much—except that business was rotten. Mr. Chantry said 'Hell' more than once before he rung off."

Once again the reporters put "laughter" in their copy, although it was only the snigger of some woman on the back benches.

Then Pearl Jerningham was called, and the coroner softened his voice a little when questioning her, and adjusted his pince-nez to look at her with sympathetic admiration. It was not often that he had such a charming lady in his witness box.

"Now, Miss Jerningham, I am extremely sorry to distress you by a few questions, but I am sure you will understand that I am doing so in order to clear up this tragic affair in which you have my very great sympathy. You were engaged to the deceased, were you not?"

"Yes," said Pearl.

"The deceased was looking forward happily to his wedding day?"

"I hope so," said Pearl.

The coroner smiled slightly.

"You mean you believe so?"

Pearl nodded.

"There was no misunderstanding between you, no quarrel which might have caused him to contemplate suicide?"

"None whatever."

"He had no cause to be jealous about you? There was no suggestion of any other man claiming your affection?"

Pearl's face flushed slightly. Involuntarily her eyes strayed towards Brandon. There were several people in court, including the coroner, who observed that direction of her glance.

"Mr. Chantry had no cause for jealousy," she answered. "He was not worried on my account."

"On anybody else's account?" asked the coroner quickly.

"Only about business affairs, so far as I know," said Pearl. "He told me that he was getting anxious about the financial state of England."

"I'm not surprised," said the coroner. "We're all getting anxious." There was a murmur of laughter among the clerks and reporters, as though he had said something extremely amusing.

"Did he ever suggest that he was a ruined man, or anything like that?" asked the coroner, frowning slightly at this demonstration of unseemly mirth.

"Never," said Pearl. "I thought he had plenty of money, in spite of his anxieties."

"Exactly," said the coroner, as though quite understanding her motive for wanting to marry the "deceased." At least, that was what his "exactly" conveyed to the mind of Francis Brandon who felt murderous towards this perky little man with the pince-nez at the tip of his beak-like nose.

The coroner produced a letter from his papers and spoke to the witness again.

"I'm afraid I must read the deceased's last letter to you."

"Is it quite necessary?" asked Pearl.

"It shows his state of mind. I will leave out the unessential passages."

Pearl's face went pale when that letter was read. It had been written to her within an hour of Chantry's death. She had read it in that room at Yeoman's Farm when Brandon had been with her.

> "*I am a ruined man. I can't face the disgrace that will come to me. I dare not ask you to share it, my dear. When I asked you to marry me I believed that I could get out of all my difficulties by a stroke of luck. I took big risks with this hope in my heart. They have failed. I am a broken man, without courage. It was caddish of me to let our wedding day come so near with this darkness*

creeping closer. I am on the edge of the precipice. I will not drag you down into that pit which I have dug for myself by folly and ambition. There is only one way out, and that is alone. Oh, my dear and beautiful Pearl. . . ."

The coroner read this in a low voice and then let the letter drop onto his desk.

"That is enough. It shows that the mind of the deceased was extremely apprehensive of impending disaster due to his financial losses."

He glared through his glasses at the court, where there was the sound of subdued laughter. It was due to his use of the word "apprehensive," upon which the butler had insisted.

"Silence!" cried an old usher. "Silence there," said a police constable.

The medical evidence was clear. The deceased had died from a self-inflicted wound. The coroner summed up the rest of the evidence. The bullet had been fired from a revolver which belonged to the dead man. The letter to Miss Jerningham proved that he contemplated suicide. The evidence of his friends in the city suggested that his financial situation was very unsound. They need not go into that fully, said the coroner. Doubtless it would be the subject of investigation elsewhere. He suggested to the jury that they had enough evidence before them to record a verdict of "Suicide while temporarily insane." There was no shadow of suspicion against anyone in court or out of it, although one witness—here he glanced sternly at Brandon—had been unsatisfactory in his way of giving evidence.

Brandon waited for the verdict, which was in accordance with the coroner's summing up. Then he tried to get out of court before the other witnesses, but was held back by a policeman until the coroner had risen. Pearl Jerningham stood beside him at the door when the reporters pressed past them.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "That little man——!"

She caught hold of his hand and held it for a moment. Then she took her father's arm and went out into the street, where a crowd was waiting for a glimpse of her. They made way respectfully, and one girl expressed the opinion that it was a "shime."

"Just before 'er wedding, they say! Well, one never knows, does one? Still, I do call it a shime!"

Brandon's nerves were all frayed after his handling from that preposterous coroner. For the first time since the war he felt a moral need of

alcohol, and ordered a brandy at the Bear. Then he took the bus to Harley Green and walked up to his cottage, where his mother was waiting anxiously for news.

"What happened?" she said. "You're frightfully late, Frank."

"I might have been later," he said grimly. "I had a near squeak of being arrested for murder."

Being a novelist he exaggerated the danger, and alarmed his mother for a time, until he told her the verdict.

"I'm sorry for Pearl," she said. "She won't marry a rich man after all, poor dear."

"That's hardly the right way of putting it," answered Brandon rather irritably. "It's more tragic than that."

Mrs. Brandon glanced at him as he knocked his pipe against the fireplace. He needed a pipe after that inquest.

"Yes, I see the tragedy," said Mrs. Brandon. "Dreadful, of course."

33

THROUGH the Avenels Brandon heard that Pearl had taken a place as companion to an Italian *contessa* in Rome. She had sold her wedding frocks and all those pretty things which she had ordered from the milliners in Beauchamp Place with such shining eyes, with such delight, with such excitement. Mr. Jerningham was faced with all those bills, and, needless to say, Pearl got next to nothing for the things which had cost so much. Buying and selling are different affairs in millinery and motor cars.

Brandon saw her once before she went to stay with her aunt in town three weeks before starting on that new adventure.

She was pale and looked strained after that tragic ordeal, but she did not shirk talking about the inquest, and was able to smile over the coroner's attempts to arouse suspicion against an innocent witness.

"If I hadn't known you, I might have thought you had committed a murder," she said. "You looked like Eugene Aram. There was a guilty look in your eyes, Frank."

She laughed with a touch of her former merriment, and then was grave.

"Don't think I'm heartless," she said. "I've been weeping my eyes out. But one can't go on crying forever."

For a moment there was a suspicion of tearfulness in her eyes again, but she kept control of herself.

"Of course, I've been crying for myself mostly," she said. "It's myself I'm sorry for, and I suppose that *is* heartless. Aren't we all like that a little when people die? We weep for ourselves and not for the dead."

"I suppose so," said Brandon.

"I don't feel broken-hearted," she told him. "He was kind and generous and charming, but I don't want to pretend that I'm wailing for my dead love. It's my pride that's hurt. My hope of luxury. My worldly ambition. Oh, I'm thoroughly selfish. The Jerninghams are. All of us!"

"It's because you analyze yourself and hate insincerity," said Brandon. "You're not really selfish. You only see the inevitable mixture of motives that goes on in one's mind."

Pearl gave him a grateful and friendly glance.

"That's chivalrous," she told him. "I wish I could believe that I haven't been thinking of myself, first and last. I broke down when I thought of selling all those frocks, which I shall never wear now. Death seems nothing compared with my disappointment, my return to poverty, my humiliation."

"I don't believe that," said Brandon. "You're doing yourself an injustice. I marvelled at your courage that evening."

He meant that evening when she had said, "I am brave," and would not let him bar the way, and lifted the blanket from the face of her dead lover.

She knew he meant that, and thought back to that scene while now she sat on the floor of the drawing room, holding her hand against the firelight in the old Georgian house where her grandmother lived, on the south side of Harley Green.

"Death is appalling," she said in a low voice. "One pretends not to be afraid, but fear turns one cold. I had seen him the night before. He seemed cheerful in a quiet way. He played a game of billiards with Father, and I watched how he handled his cue, and noticed how broad his shoulders were. He seemed so strong. When I saw him dead like that it didn't seem possible. It seems absurd that one can be perfectly alive one moment and perfectly dead the next. That's the frightful shock of it."

"It was like that in the war," said Brandon. "One laughed with a man, and he fell dead at one's side."

Pearl shivered a little.

"I hate death," she said, after a silence which lasted for a minute or more. "I hate to see a dead bird. I hate to see flowers die and leaves fall. . . . It's worse to see a dead man. Especially when one was going to marry him."

She blew up the fire with a bellows which she took from the side of the hearth.

"Let's talk about something else!" she pleaded. "It's no use brooding. How's the novel selling?"

"Rather well," said Brandon. He did not tell her that it was selling in a fantastic way and had already reached its hundredth thousand, not counting the American edition. He didn't tell her that he was no longer the poverty-stricken man who had once asked her to share a cottage with him not wholly his. He hid the awful truth that he was a "best seller."

"One of these days you'll be able to afford a new suit of clothes," she remarked thoughtfully, looking at his worn suit, which he couldn't bear to part with just yet, though actually he had ordered some new clothes in Savile Row. He saw her lips touched with a smile and was glad that she had the heart to be humorous again.

After tea she spoke about her Italian *contessa* in Rome.

"I shall have the dullest time. She sits all day in a room without a fire, reading French novels and embroidering tapestry, or abusing Mussolini when the door is well and truly shut. She used to be beautiful, and wears wonderful old rings on dirty fingers. She has had one husband and many lovers, and her blood is as blue as the sky of Rome in June. She wants me to teach her English so that she can read Edgar Wallace in his own tongue. She prefers him to Shakespeare."

"It sounds rather dreary," said Brandon.

Pearl Jerningham sighed and then laughed.

"I'm doing it for Father's sake. I've let him in for a lot of expense. I shall have to keep my end up. On the cheap again! The end of all dreams."

"I may be coming out to Rome in a month or two," said Brandon quietly. "I've promised Mother to take her away from an English winter."

Pearl unclasped the hands from her knees as she sat on the floor again before the fire.

"Why, that will be wonderful! You can take me to see pagan Rome and all the sights. We'll steal away from my Italian *contessa* and lunch together

in Italian restaurants. You should see me twiddle spaghetti! It's an art, and I'm rather good at it."

She forgot the tragic side of life for a moment.

"Have you come into a fortune?" she asked. "Wintering in Rome—isn't that rather expensive for a literary gent? I mean, unless he writes detective tales or naughty novels."

Brandon looked embarrassed for a moment.

"My novel has made a bit of a hit," he confessed. "I daresay I can afford to put in a month or two—at a second-class hotel."

"How splendid!" cried Pearl. "I shan't feel such a hopeless exile."

34

It was in the Pincio gardens overlooking the Eternal City that Brandon asked Pearl Jerningham to marry him. He also made the same suggestion in the Colosseum, after dodging an Italian guide who spoke bad English with a good American accent. Once again he brought forward the idea in a restaurant built in one of the archways of Trajan's Forum and decorated in Roman style with boat-like lamps on stone ledges and crystal torches in the shape of flames.

In the Pincio gardens, where they sat on a marble seat after a visit to the Borghese galleries, Pearl warned him that it was a long way from Harley Green, Surrey, and that it was impossible for any man not to make love to any woman in such a garden, where white-limbed goddesses and laughing satyrs—weathered by an out-of-doors life—played hide-and-seek among the cypress trees. Then she sneezed and said she was getting blue in the nose with cold.

They paced the terrace together, and Pearl took Brandon's hand and drew it under her arm and walked close to him, shoulder to shoulder, leaning a little against him, which was very pleasant.

"It's nice having you here," she told him. "That old woman who sits in a gilded room with a painted ceiling—smelling of camphor and ancient dust—nearly broke my spirit before you came. She has told me all her love affairs in intimate detail ten times over. I want to scream when she begins all over again with the lieutenant of the Papal Guard who kissed her neck behind a pillar of St. Peter's in eighteen-eighty."

“Pearl,” said Brandon, “what about it? Why not get away from that wretched old woman and come back to England with me? You know I love you. Shall I tell you again?”

Pearl invited him to tell her again. She liked hearing it. But she hoped the Italian policeman standing near them on the terrace and clapping his white-gloved hands was not a student of English. It was always embarrassing when a man declared his love in a public place. It had happened to her once before. A French officer in Avignon had made the most passionate proposals to her in the palace of the Popes. Every word he said was understood by an English lady with a party of tourists. She was extremely shocked, and nearly dropped her Baedeker when the French officer said something particularly audacious.

“I was only eighteen then,” said Pearl. “The risks I’ve managed to escape! The innocence of my happy girlhood!”

“Pearl,” said Brandon, “anything is better than being companion to an immoral old woman in a mouldy palace without a fire. I could do better for you than that. I believe I could make you happy. It needn’t be a cottage in Harley Green. What about a flat somewhere in Kensington?”

“Do you mean Kensington or West Kensington?” asked Pearl with sham anxiety. “If it’s West Kensington I shudder at the thought. I know those dreary houses where the shabby genteel live behind grubby lace curtains, and where street singers wail their lugubrious airs through London fogs—while the muffin man rings his beastly little bell and lean cats prowl through the area railings. Father and I once stayed at a private hotel in West Kensington. It was really a boarding house. I used to weep in my bedroom because my spirits sank so low. Frank, my dear, if you mean West Kensington, I cannot continue this conversation.”

He insisted that he didn’t mean West Kensington. He meant any place which seemed to her good. Knightsbridge, for instance.

“Too near Harrod’s!” she told him. “Too near innumerable shops which would tempt me to abominable extravagance.”

“Be extravagant,” he said, as though he owned all the wealth in the world.

She pretended to be shocked at his recklessness.

“My dear, you may have written a successful novel—it depressed me a good deal, I must confess—but you don’t understand the costliness of a worldly woman surrounded by temptation. At the sight of silk undies—rose pink—she loses all morality. She goes into a shop to buy a packet of pins

and comes out with a Paris model. Bang goes eighty guineas of her husband's hard-earned cash."

"Eighty?" asked Brandon incredulously.

"At least," said Pearl solemnly. "You've no idea, Frank. Then you have to feed her, and she likes expensive restaurants; and amuse her—constantly—at theatres and supper dances. You have to pay her bridge debts——"

Brandon laughed.

"You're trying to scare me. I refuse to be scared. Pearl, will you marry me? I'm not a rich man, but I love you, and I'm not so beastly poor as all that. I'm doing rather well. We could have a good time. We could be marvellously happy, don't you think?"

Pearl's eyes softened in the twilight of an Italian afternoon in winter along an avenue in the Pincio gardens between spear-headed cypresses, tall and black against a cold blue sky.

"Frank," she said, "I'm not the woman for you, though I'm glad you love me. I'm restless and reckless. It's my nature. I couldn't sit twiddling my thumbs while you wrote drab masterpieces in another room. You ought to marry Audrey Avenel. She wants you."

"That's absurd," said Brandon. "She's a child."

"A charming child and very sensible. Much more suitable for you, my dear. She would make a loyal little wife to you."

"I want *your* loyalty," said Brandon. "If you would give me your love I should be sure of it."

Pearl released his hand, which was tucked under her arm.

"Frank, don't tempt me to be horrible. When you were poor I became engaged to a rich man. I liked him, but I didn't love him. What's the use of pretending? Now he's dead and you are not so poor. What would people think if I married you? What would your mother say? How could I face any honest eyes and yours?"

"There's nothing in all that if you love me," said Brandon sturdily. "That's the only question that's worth considering. Do you love me well enough to marry me—all other things apart? Can I hope for it—ever?"

She teased him again.

"Ever? Does that mean three weeks, or three months, or three years? Heaven knows what might happen to us both in three years. And now in three minutes I must go back to that hideous old hag of mine. She's

expecting a cardinal to tea. She wants me to be nice to him. He admires pretty women, she says, the wicked old wretch!"

"The Cardinal?"

Pearl laughed.

"The *contessa*. The Cardinal is a charming old man with a face carved in ivory."

Brandon took her back in a horse *vettura* to a narrow street off the Corso. They were jolted too much for intimate conversation. Under the archway which led into the courtyard of an old palazzo where a stone nymph who had lost her nose played with a dolphin above a dry fountain, Brandon held her hand for a moment, warm when she drew it out of her muff.

"To-morrow afternoon," he reminded her.

It was almost dark now, and they were alone in the world, it seemed.

"What do you want?" she asked when he drew her towards him.

"A kiss. Why not?"

"Highly dangerous," she told him. "Very compromising. Shocking of an English novelist in Rome."

She held her head back for a moment and put her hand against his chest. But it was all sham. She let him kiss her, and seemed to like it, before she fled from him into a dark doorway where wooden stairs led up to an Italian *contessa's* painted rooms.

It was in the Ulpia restaurant, under the arch of Trajan's Forum, that Brandon tried for the third time to talk of marriage. Their table was screened by a stone pillar and felt quite private, although only a yard away an officer of the Carabinieri was making love somewhat noisily to a young woman of his own city, and the other tables were taken by members of the various embassies and distinguished young men of the Fascist régime, and lady friends, very elegant, all chattering vivaciously.

"This table is too near the wall," remarked Pearl. "It's dangerous."

"Good heavens, why?" asked Brandon. "A draught?"

Pearl, who knew her Rome, explained that the place was a kind of whispering gallery if one sat too near the wall. One's voice travelled round the arc and could be heard quite clearly at the far end.

"We must be discreet," she insisted. "No naughtiness. No criticism of Musso——"

She put a finger to her lips, horrified by her own indiscretion, and peeped round the pillar to see whether any sensation had been created at the other end of the restaurant. The only sensation seemed to be the admiration of a good-looking man with a monocle who gazed at her with a smile which she ignored. Brandon was perfectly discreet until the coffee came. They talked of the Avenels. Sylvia had "done a bunk," said Pearl, who had received a letter that morning from Audrey. There had been a domestic crisis of the first magnitude when Colonel Avenel discovered that she was spending her evenings with Robin when she was supposed to be dining with her aunt in town.

Pearl read out this narrative from Audrey's letter.

> " '*Father accused Sylvia of lying to him. She had the nerve to say that she could only safeguard her liberty by this means. Being kept under Early Victorian restraints by a father who happened to be a mediævalist, she had been bound to adopt the methods of Early Victorian daughters.*
>
> " ' "*Damn it, Sylvia,*" *said Father,* "*what do you mean by insulting your mother and myself? I've a good mind to box your ears. Kindly go to your room and stay there for the rest of the evening. I decline to sit at the same table with a daughter who has disgraced her family name by behaving like a wanton.*" '
>
> " ' "*Very well, Father,*" *said Sylvia, speaking like a perfect lady,* "*if you call me filthy names I'll leave this house at the earliest possible moment. If I have to go on the streets it will be your fault. Audrey and I have been very patient with you, but we decline to be kept in purdah, like child victims of Mother India. I'm off*" ' . . ."

Pearl Jerningham laughed at this extract from Audrey's letter.

"She dramatizes the whole scene. Can't you see it, Frank? Colonel Avenel getting purple with rage, and Audrey watching her slip of a sister with amusement and alarm, and poor Mrs. Avenel, like a full-blown rose, shedding tears at the tea table. It's like a page from Jane Austen, isn't it? But it's in Surrey of post-war England, which hasn't changed as much as you novelists like to pretend."

"What happened?" asked Brandon. "I rather sympathize with Sylvia. She wants her mate."

"Very weak of you," said Pearl. "I'm all on the side of Colonel Avenel. What we daughters want is discipline. If I had been spanked soundly by an irate parent I should have been a better woman. If ever I have a daughter ——"

She glanced at Brandon and laughed at some secret thought, and then turned to Audrey's letter again.

"The rest of it is quite sensational. This is what Audrey writes:

> " '*Of course, Father didn't believe it when she said, "I'm off." Nor did I, having used the threat of a bed-sitting room in Ebury Street far too often. But before dinner she packed some things in a bag, dodged down the back stairs, snatched the baby Austin out of the garage, waved good-bye to Peter—our black spaniel—and headed towards the London road, as seen by the gardener's boy. At dinner Father said, "Where is Sylvia?"—forgetting his remark about not sitting down to table with a wanton. Echo answers, "Where's Sylvia?" . . . Gone! . . . General consternation. Evidence of the gardener's boy. Telephone messages to an aunt in town. No news of the missing lady. Came the dawn. . . . Two days pass. Father goes to town and peers into the faces of painted ladies, fearing the worst. On the third day a telegram. "Robin and I were married to-day. Love to all. Letter follows." . . . Curtain.*' "

"Well, I'm dashed!" said Brandon.

Pearl Jerningham laughed and then was thoughtful.

"She's burnt her boats. Rather plucky, but very rash. Can that boy afford to keep her?"

"Four pounds a week," said Brandon.

"Good heavens! They'll starve to death."

Pearl was distressed. It seemed to her really terrible. On such an income they would have to live in inconceivable squalor.

"There are millions of young couples who marry on less and get on very well," said Brandon.

"A daughter of the Avenels," Pearl reminded him. "Brought up in the lap of luxury. Pampered since babyhood."

"She'll get a job somewhere," suggested Brandon. "The Colonel will help them out a bit. Perhaps the boy will pull himself up and earn a bit more. I bet they'll be as happy as love birds."

Pearl asked him to order some wine. She felt in need of it at the moment. Four pounds a week, and a baby next year! How desperate! That poor child!

Brandon ordered the wine, which was Asti Spumante and Pearl recovered her spirits and showed him how to twiddle spaghetti with grace and art.

"By the way," she said presently, "there's a postscript to Audrey's letter. I ought not to read it to you. But you'll like to hear it."

She turned over the letter which lay by the side of her plate, and read a few more words in Audrey's flowing script.

> " '*Give my love to Frank Brandon. I'll slit your gullet if you grab him. You're dangerous in Surrey, but in Italy I fear you're irresistible.*' "

"She's only being humorous," said Brandon laughing loudly. That Asti Spumante, or Pearl's beauty, went to his head a little.

"That English rose loves you, Frank. Why philander after a raddled old woman of thirty, broken on the wheel of life?"

She looked exquisite, and every Italian in view of her gave her the homage of his eyes.

Brandon became indiscreet in an Italian restaurant where voices could be overheard.

"I love you. I want you to marry me."

He put his hand on hers across the table and held it tight.

"This is very dreadful behaviour for an Englishman," said Pearl, fluttering her eyelashes. "Black-shirt stuff. Sicilian courtship. Unhand me, villain! Do you mind if I smoke?"

The bill gave Brandon a shock. It came to more than he had spent in a week at Harley Green with his mother's expenses included. He had a sense of guilt, and thought of men in England on the dole, and then of others without even that. He could afford it, of course, by stupendous luck, but his conscience smote him, and he had not yet acquired the habit of easy spending. Then he dulled this twinge in Asti Spumante, and knew that he was having a wonderful hour, beyond his dreams in Harley Green.

Pearl could not stay out late. The old *contessa* put on her bed socks at ten o'clock. They walked back to the Corso arm-in-arm and then stood in the darkness of the old courtyard, where he had kissed her once before and

where he had every intention of kissing her again. One lantern on an iron bracket gave them just a gleam of light to look into each other's eyes.

"Thanks for a good dinner," she said, knowing that he would take her in his arms.

"Pearl," he said, "I love you."

"I feel like a servantmaid under a London lamp-post," she told him when he drew her close and kissed her.

"Why not? Isn't it good to feel like that?"

"I thought you were a nice quiet man, immune from this sort of thing," she complained.

"I'm your lover. You know that. Say you love me."

"My dear," she said seriously, "of course I love you! But that's not everything. If I marry you, you won't like it in a year or two. I'm not meant for a poor man's wife."

"I'm a rich man," he boasted. "I'm disgustingly successful. I'm a 'best seller.' "

"I'm not meant to be any man's wife," she argued. "I'm difficult to live with. I'm utterly selfish. I'm warning you."

"I love you," he told her, as though she might be surprised to hear it.

"Frank," said Pearl Jerningham, "a little while ago I was engaged to another man. I stood by his dead body. It's too soon, anyhow. It's indecent."

"You didn't love him. You love me. You've told me so. Nothing else matters. Tell me again."

"Frank, you're absurd. You're writing another novel in your mind. You're a sentimentalist."

"I'm a realist," he answered. " 'This ruthless realist,' wrote Mr. Mark Ambrose, the famous critic."

"You don't see me as I am," she insisted. "I'm one of the Jerninghams. The reckless Jerninghams. Don't you remember?"

"I see you as you are," he told her, holding her so that he could see her face in the light of that old lantern. "Most beautiful. Most exquisite."

"I'm a Persian cat. I love luxury."

"Why not?" he asked. "I can give it to you."

"I believe I should be unfaithful to you," she warned him. "I had a great-aunt who ran away with somebody else's husband. I'm exactly like her. I

feel it in my bones."

"I've seen her portrait," said Brandon. "You're much more beautiful."

"She was a wanton. She ought to have been whipped. What will you do if I betray you and run off with somebody else's husband?"

"I shall still love you."

"Your mother detests me," said Pearl, thinking of some other reason against this love.

Brandon denied it, though he knew it was true.

"My father will bore you to death with his monologues," said Pearl.

"He interests me. I like him."

"I shan't dare to show my face in Harley Green. All the village folk would say, 'That's the woman who was going to marry Mr. Chantry before he killed himself.' They would think me a harlot."

"They can think what they damn well please," said Brandon. "I love you. When will you marry me?"

"Frank," said Pearl, laughing across his shoulder, "this is ridiculous! There's a green-eyed cat watching us. It's an Italian cat. It might tell Mussolini."

"He'd like to hear it," said Brandon. "He believes in marriage. He's on the side of the babies."

"Frank," said Pearl Jerningham, "if that old *contessa* hears us talking, she'll come downstairs in her bed socks."

Brandon was highly amused by this idea.

"I'd like to see her! I'd laugh like anything. I would announce our engagement to her."

"After all, I don't think she *would* come down in her bed socks," said Pearl. "I believe she would throw her slops out of the window—onto our heads. It's an Italian habit with nocturnal lovers."

She laughed in his arms at this absurd thought.

"Pearl!" he said. "Do you love me?"

"I've told you so."

"Will you marry me?"

"I suppose I shall have to," she said. "You're so persistent, and I'm so weak. But I've warned you. Don't say I didn't warn you."

Brandon held her tighter in his arms.

"Oh, my Pearl," he said, "my beautiful Pearl!"

He was surprised to find that her eyes were wet.

When he went back to the Albergo Flora that evening, he found that his mother had gone up to her room. She had been tired out by too many picture galleries and general sightseeing, and had begged off coming out to dinner with her son, who had told her that Pearl was coming.

Brandon tapped at her door.

"In bed yet, Mother?"

She was not in bed. She opened the door, and he saw that she had been reading at her dressing table. Her book lay open under a rose-shaded light.

"Had a good time?" she asked, looking at his flushed face.

"Mother," he said, "I'm going to marry Pearl."

For a moment she was silent, and in that moment looked a little older.

"I know," she told him. "It had to happen. I expected it."

He went up to her and took one of her hands and raised it to his lips.

"Do you mind very much? Aren't you glad for my sake?"

She hoped he would be happy. . . . She knew, but did not say, that she had lost her son. He would go away from her with his mate. She would be rather lonely in a country cottage. . . .

The marriage of Francis Brandon to Pearl Jerningham at the English church in Rome was duly announced in *The Times* and the *Morning Post*. Among those who read it at English breakfast tables was Audrey Avenel, who spilt her coffee and burst into tears before her father and fled to her own room, where she locked the door.

35

It was a different Brandon in some ways, exterior and interior, who appeared in London after his marriage to Pearl Jerningham.

Exteriorly, he was smartened up. No one could suggest with any plausibility that he slept in his clothes. Not that he affected a style that would advertise his tailor, but his trousers were creased in the right place, his cuffs were no longer frayed, nor his elbows shiny. He regretted parting with his old "bags," and felt uncomfortable, at least when working, in those

new lounge suits which made him look, he thought, like a commercial traveller, but Pearl preferred him that way. Gently but firmly she had led him to her father's tailor and chosen the patterns. Quietly but relentlessly she had insisted upon dispatching his ancient wardrobe to the Salvation Army. She had yielded only to his passionate plea regarding a blue serge suit in which he had gone tramping with Val Foster. The lining was somewhat torn inside the armpits, but otherwise it was in good preservation, and he felt at ease in it when he sat down to his desk. Pearl, who had a standard of male haberdashery based upon her father's ideas, was aghast at the state of his shirts and underclothes. He had done very well for years with three dress shirts. She insisted upon his ordering three dozen. It seemed to him extravagant and absurd, although he was quite willing to order three hundred if she considered that right for the husband of Pearl Jerningham. So with collars and ties and socks. His socks alarmed him for several weeks, until he got used to them. Pearl had chosen them and had a fancy for gay patterns. They would have looked admirable above the brown shoes of an Oxford undergraduate. They might have suited an officer of the Guards in mufti. They were not in tune with the mentality of a novelist. But Pearl liked them.

In appearance, therefore, Brandon was different from the man who had gone down to the village stores in Harley Green and stuffed a pound of cheese in one pocket of his jacket and a tin of tobacco in the other, without worrying about the bulge. He was self-conscious about it for a time, especially after meeting some of his colleagues in Fleet Street who stared at him doubtfully, looked him up and down with a certain ironical surprise, and seemed a little stand-offish in manner.

Being a shy man, he had given them the idea, perhaps, that he was putting on "side" because of his new prosperity.

"I suppose you're a cut above Fleet Street now, old man?" suggested a sub-editor with whom he had worked in the old days. "One of our best sellers, eh? The Riviera and all that! Some people have all the luck."

He detected a slight note of hostility in his friend's voice—a faint trace of bitterness. He was still at the sub-editor's desk. Brandon was independent of night editors and the soul-destroying grind of newspaper work. In the opinion of his former colleagues Brandon had been a damn bad journalist. That novel of his was just reporting. The journalistic touch! A blue pencil would have done it a bit of good. Somehow, it had got hold of the half-educated mind. . . .

"I miss Fleet Street," said Brandon, insincerely as he afterwards acknowledged to himself. "I'd like to be back at the old desk now and then."

"Not you," said his unbelieving friend. "You've escaped. . . . Well, so long. Don't wear yourself out writing autographs for American flappers."

Brandon blushed. That very morning he had found thirteen letters with American stamps asking for his autograph, and mostly from college girls. One of them had "adopted" him as her favourite author. Another demanded his photograph inscribed to Miss Evelina B. Schwuitzinger. Another confessed that she was crazy about *The Way of Escape*, which she thought the best novel she had ever read since *If Winter Comes*, by John Drinkwater, or *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, by Rudyard Kipling.

The next time Brandon went to Fleet Street he put on his blue serge suit. He shrank from the hideous thought that his old colleagues should suspect him of snobbishness because of those sporting-looking socks which made his feet feel too big for his boots.

Interiorly he was changed. Marriage had changed him, though not so much as he thought. He was astonished at his own happiness. In a morbid way he was panic-stricken sometimes lest it might be snatched away from him. His honeymoon with Pearl, after his mother had gone back to Willowbrook Cottage, had been a miracle. They had gone to Florence and then to Venice. The weather had been vile—so Pearl said—though he hadn't noticed it much. He had only noticed Pearl. Her beauty made him tremble sometimes in her presence. He was still shy of her, and of himself. It seemed incredible that she should be his wife, that he could go into her room when she was dressing, that he could see her with her hair undone, that he could sit by her side, that he could hold her in his arms. She was lovely in a thousand ways he hadn't known. Sometimes when he came upon her suddenly, after a brief absence—a walk by himself, the posting of a letter, an errand for something she wanted him to buy—he was startled by some new revelation, when she sat writing in the lounge of the Danieli in Venice or drying her hair before an electric fire in her room, or looking down at him from the balcony above the hall of this old palace, laughing when he raised his head with a jerk, knowing somehow that she was there. In that balcony, with a Venetian shawl wrapped round her, tight over the hips in the true style, she looked—to him—like a princess of the Italian renaissance. In a gondola on the Grand Canal—she complained that it was very damp and chilly—she gained the homage of the gondolier who nearly collided with other craft because he was gazing so rapturously at the *bellissima signora* who chatted to him in his own tongue. They danced together on the polished floors of the Danieli, and Brandon knew that every man in the room—gray-haired Americans, Italian officers, English tourists—looked at Pearl with admiration because of her English beauty.

Once he overheard one of those elderly Americans speak of her to his good-looking son.

"Portrait of a lady by Joshua Reynolds!"

"Gee!" said the good-looking son. "They'd like her at Hollywood."

And she was the wife of Francis Brandon of Willowbrook Cottage in the county of Surrey, once a poor devil who had written unsuccessful novels, articles for a Northern syndicate, short stories at hack rates—until a bit of luck had come. He had been almost a shell-shock case in a war which he tried to forget. He had been a solitary bird, shunning the human crowd because he was shy of it. In Harley Green even the village folk didn't think much of him. A writing bloke! Now he was married to Pearl Jerningham, and it didn't seem real. He had a dreadful suspicion that he might wake up one morning and find her gone. Three times in Venice he had this dream and wakened with a harsh cry of "Pearl!" because she had gone, he thought.

"What's the matter?" cried Pearl, startled out of her sleep. "Why did you cry out, darling?"

That horrible dream scared him for two minutes afterwards.

"I thought you had left me," he said in a broken voice. "I dreamed you had gone from me."

"Here I am," she assured him with a sleepy laugh. "No such luck for you, Frank. . . . Not yet!"

In London, after the honeymoon, they stayed for a week at a small hotel in the Buckingham Palace Road, while they explored the possibilities of flats and houses. It was a small hotel, but rich in its interior decoration. Their bedroom with bath attached was hung with cloth of gold. There were eiderdowns to match. The twin beds had golden rails, or at least, they looked as good as gold.

"Quite nice," said Pearl. "Not too squalid after the old-fashioned splendour of the Danieli."

Brandon laughed uneasily. He was thinking of his little bare bedroom at Willowbrook Cottage, uncarpeted. He was getting just a little tired of the luxury of these hotels. It made him feel uneasy. Pearl was used to this kind of thing. She belonged to it. It was new to him. He didn't like it. It was not in his philosophy, somehow.

"What bug is biting you?" asked Pearl, looking round from the dressing table where she was putting out her hairbrushes and little silver-topped bottles with which she travelled.

As a matter of fact, he was thinking for a moment of a newspaper placard which had caught his eye as he came into the hotel. It didn't seem to refer at all to a double bedroom with golden hangings. It announced a rise of unemployment over the two million figure.

"I shall be glad when we get into a home of our own," he said, smiling at his wife's face in the mirror. "I want to get back to something—well—less ornate. This room doesn't look respectable to me. It's like a gilded cage for a millionaire's mistress."

Pearl thought that remark extremely amusing and rather odd.

"It's quite an ordinary room in a small hotel, Frank. Still, I'm all for a home of our own. The point is: Where?"

The point was settled after many interviews with estate agents, considerable expenditure on taxis, many ascents to top-floor flats in great blocks of mansions between South Kensington and St. John's Wood, and many visits to small houses in Belgravia and Mayfair. Francis Brandon, novelist, signed a contract which gave him a seven-years lease of a tall, thin, red-brick house, with a green door and a brass knocker, in St. Leonard's Terrace, Chelsea. It was, said the estate agent, a bijou residence and highly desirable. The premium, he said, was very moderate. It contained the original panelling of the Adam period. It was a house of "character."

Pearl thought it poky but pleasant. She hoped to goodness there weren't beetles in the basement. She liked the green shutters, and the view over the gardens of the Royal Hospital for old soldiers. She thought she could make something rather amusing of the double room on the first floor with its white-panelled walls. Frank could have his study on the top floor, where it would be perfectly quiet.

Brandon liked this old house very much, but didn't like the premium he had to pay. It frightened him. It amounted to more than he had earned in ten years, previous to the success of *The Way of Escape*.

"Isn't it a bit more than I can afford?" he said, before concluding the contract.

Pearl jeered at his anxiety.

"What? The most popular author in England can't afford a mouldy old house in Chelsea? With all those royalties earning money while he sleeps! And 'talkie' rights, and American contracts, and offers worth their weight in gold!"

"Supposing my next novel is a failure?" asked Brandon. "Supposing I dry up? Supposing I get stricken with paralysis or rheumatoid arthritis or

anæmia of the brain?"

"All life is a risk," said Pearl cheerfully. "And this house is the cheapest thing we've seen for its size and position. Besides, I've fallen in love with it."

"That settles it," said Brandon, signing the contract.

Pearl put her hands on his shoulders, and he took one of them and drew it to his lips.

"I can't believe in my own luck! It's all too marvellous. I'm not worthy of it."

Pearl thrust her fingers through his hair.

"The man with an inferiority complex! The novelist with a Nonconformist Conscience! A self-tortured soul who feels guilty when he's happy and sinful when he's satisfied!"

She had found out something about him.

36

THE house in St. Leonard's Terrace was charming when Pearl had furnished it, with the help of Harrod's, and other treasure houses, from which she ordered Queen Anne chairs, William and Mary tables, early Georgian wardrobes, and other pieces suitable to a house with panelled rooms and a powder closet. She knew her period and was not to be put off with sham antiques. She could tell by the feel of a table leg and the polish of a bit of wood whether it had been worn by time or faked in the factory. She could detect the true workmanship of Sheraton, Chippendale, and Hepplewhite by instinct. She chose flowered chintzes for the window curtains. The bedroom wall papers might have been designed by William Morris. It was all new and amusing to Brandon, who had never studied these things or lived with them. It was all alarming to him when the bills began to arrive. He was not accustomed to prosperity.

He had other shocks. One of them was when Pearl introduced him to his motor car, driven up to the house by an elegant young man who looked like the son of a duke, and probably was.

"There it is!" cried Pearl, leaving the luncheon table with an excited laugh to draw back the window curtain.

"What's that?" asked Brandon, wondering if some new antique had arrived from the Brompton Road and how much he would have to pay for it.

"The new car, Frank!"

There had been a slight argument about it. Brandon disliked cars. He particularly disliked the idea of owning one. He had tried to persuade Pearl that such things were unnecessary in London with such extraordinarily good bus services and a taxi whenever she wanted one. But Pearl had set her heart on a yellow Chrysler, and when Pearl had set her heart on something Brandon delighted to give it to her. At first sight, through the window of the morning room, this new car seemed to fill the whole street. But that was merely the distortion of his imagination. It was not really as long as that.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "That's a car for a film actress or profiteer. I should blush if any of my pals saw me in a thing like that!"

"It's a perfectly good car," said Pearl. "Not too big and not too small. I'll teach you how to drive it."

"Not me!" said Brandon. "My nerves aren't good enough for that sort of game. I would rather go over the top again and chance a German barrage."

"Pooh!" laughed Pearl. "A little child shall lead them. Let's try it out in Richmond Park."

The young man who looked like the son of a duke—so much more distinguished than a literary man who was going to pay for the car—complimented Pearl on her driving, especially when she slipped between a tramcar and a motor lorry with the eighth of an inch to spare and a long screech on her horn.

"Nothing to teach you, Mrs. Brandon! Perfect judgment. I can see you're sure of yourself."

Brandon had not been at all sure of himself. At that moment he had prepared for certain death and had seen a vision of Pearl lying mangled by his dead body. But that was not his only reason for taking a grudge against this car. He felt uncomfortable, morally and spiritually, on its well sprung cushions. He felt hideously embarrassed one afternoon when he sat inside it, waiting while Pearl was doing some shopping in Bond Street, and he was seen by one of the members of the Pen and Palette Club who happened to pass by and look him straight in the eyes. It was Vernon Jones, for whom Brandon had a real reverence as the author of several novels which had a touch of genius, though few had read them. He looked as shabby as Brandon had been not long ago. His heels had worn down on London pavements. He had postponed the price of a haircut rather too long.

For a moment he did not seem to recognize Brandon, but then he started and stopped and raised his eyebrows.

"My God, Brandon! You look very prosperous. This your car?"

Brandon lied. It was not a habit of his, but the words hurried to his lips.

"Good Lord, no! It belongs to a lady."

Vernon Jones looked reassured.

"Well, I'll let you off this time. I thought perhaps you had lost your soul as a best seller. I'm getting worried about you, my lad. The stink of success is very unhealthy down our street. Literature has become a trade. Books are being boosted like patent medicines. The best sellers are a fungoid growth. Beware of joining their immoral company. Big sales mean bad art."

He raised his hand like a prophet and made the sign of the cross in Bond Street. Then he gave a twitch of his right eyelid and proceeded on his walk, leaving Brandon disturbed and thoughtful.

The stink of success. The phrase had slashed him like the cut of a whip. *The Way of Escape* had been too successful. His friends resented it. They were beginning to class him with the best sellers who wrote with their tongues in their cheeks or pandered to the mentality of the half-educated crowd. The critics had overpraised him. Well, but it wasn't his fault if people liked his book. And that was what books were written for, anyhow. It seemed absurd that a novelist should be regarded as a dirty dog if his work appealed to a bigger public than the small crowd of intelligentsia. Preposterous! . . . All the same, he didn't like this ostentation, this public display of prosperity, into which Pearl was leading him. It didn't suit his temperament. It wasn't good at a time when so many men were out of work. Of course, it was all natural to Pearl. Her family had been brought up that way before they were hit by the war. She couldn't understand that he shrank from driving around in a car like this, and felt like a war profiteer.

"What's the matter, darling?" she asked when she came out from the shop in Bond Street. "Seeing ghosts?"

He had seen some ghosts in Bond Street. They were ghosts of men with whom he had once sat in dugouts on the western front. Some of them had been killed. And one had killed himself because he couldn't get a job in time of peace, and others—better soldiers than Brandon—were still having a thin time. The luck had come Brandon's way. It seemed unfair to him, somehow, though there was no logic in what he thought. At least, it is difficult to follow the thread of an argument which made him shy of driving in a car because some of his friends had been killed in the war. But that was how his

mind worked, and Pearl noticed that he made excuses when she suggested a drive. He preferred walking in London streets, or suggested the outside of an omnibus as the pleasantest way of getting from one place to another. Naturally, she preferred the car.

There was another cause of mental uneasiness which spoilt the perfect happiness of his new-found paradise in St. Leonard's Terrace, Chelsea. It was Alfred Kemp, who waited at table, cleaned the silver, opened the door to Pearl's visitors, valeted Brandon, and looked more distinguished than his master ever could—at least, in the opinion of Brandon himself. Pearl had engaged him from an employment agency who strongly recommended him. He had been in service as valet and butler to several titled men in Eaton Square and Mayfair. He came with very good references.

"But, Pearl," said Brandon, when she first mentioned the subject, "I don't want him to come at all. I'm certain he's going to be a confounded nuisance. It will give people a wrong impression."

Pearl was astonished.

"What sort of impression, Frank? He looks like a rural dean or an archdeacon. Perfectly respectable!"

"It makes us look snobbish. I should hate to have a manservant. What will Val Foster say, for instance?"

Pearl laughed at this sensitiveness to the opinion of Val Foster.

"What's the difference between a manservant and a maidservant, Frank? Where does snobbishness come in? He'll do twice the work of a parlourmaid, with far less fuss."

"But we *have* a parlourmaid," said Brandon.

"Oh, only a slip of a thing to make beds and do the dusting. I'm sure you'll like Kemp. He's so quiet and respectful."

Brandon hated him from the first moment. He had a mask-like face touched with side whiskers, and a quietude which was unnerving. He crept into Brandon's study with the evening paper or to see that the fire was burning all right, with a stealthiness which made Brandon start. At meal times he stood behind Brandon's chair between the courses, and Brandon was tongue-tied, although Pearl chatted away completely regardless of this third party.

"For God's sake, my dear," Brandon protested one day in a low voice, "can't we get Peggy to wait on us? Or why not wait on ourselves? I won't stand that fellow behind my back. He gives me the creeps. I can't bear him listening to our conversation."

Pearl laughed at this self-consciousness.

"Forget him, Frank. I don't even know he's there. And he waits beautifully. Never drops a fork, never forgets you like Worcester sauce with almost everything, always lights a match when you pull out a cigarette!"

"I would much rather light my own match," said Brandon. "That fellow annoys me. He's like Uriah Heep."

He hated to find this man laying out his clothes, emptying his pockets of loose change and arranging it on the dressing table, changing the links in his evening shirt. He disliked being treated like a baby or a baronet. The man bowed to him when he came down to breakfast and announced the weather of the day in a respectful and melancholy voice.

"Somewhat chilly this morning, sir." . . . "A slight fog, I'm sorry to say, sir." . . . "Not a very good day for the boat race, sir."

Brandon tried once or twice to get into some kind of human relationship with him and asked him whether he had been in the war. But he had been batman to a staff officer at G. H. Q., and it did not lead to mutual reminiscences of trench life and dugouts. Once or twice he inquired, self-consciously, about Kemp's private life, and attempted a little jocularity which failed dismally.

"I'm a confirmed bachelor, sir. In private life I live with a widowed mother."

"Any hobbies, Kemp?" asked Brandon, rattling a bunch of keys in his pocket and trying to feel at ease with his manservant.

"An occasional game of billiards, sir. Now and again I have a small bet on the day's racing. In my leisure time I read a good deal."

"Oh?" said Brandon. "That's interesting."

He was strongly tempted to ask whether Kemp had ever read any novels by an author named Francis Brandon, but his courage failed him.

"Who are your favourite authors?" he inquired.

Kemp permitted himself a moment's reflection.

"I think I may say that Mr. Galsworthy interests me most, sir. *The Forsyte Saga* appealed to me a good deal. His Forsytes reminded me of some of the gentlemen I've served in Eaton Square and neighbourhood."

Brandon felt abashed. With a slight wildness of fancy he suspected, without evidence, that Kemp had read *The Way of Escape* and didn't think much of it. He was perfectly certain, again without evidence, that Kemp regarded him with secret and haughty contempt as a man socially inferior to

other gentlemen he had known in Eaton Square and Mayfair. He confided this belief to Pearl one evening when Kemp had turned up the lights, arranged the curtains, and retired to the basement where he read the *Evening Standard* in a little room of his own.

"That man's getting on my nerves, Pearl! I can't live up to him. He despises me with a withering contempt which makes me want to hide behind the piano or crawl under the sofa. He knows I quail before him."

"How ridiculous you are, Frank!" laughed Pearl. She could not believe that he was perfectly serious, and that he blenched at the thought of letting his old friends know of this manservant in St. Leonard's Terrace. If they heard by any chance that he kept a butler, or anything resembling a butler, they would never speak to him again. To be a best seller and keep a butler would write him down as damned in Fleet Street.

But, after all, these were only small irritations in his first happiness of married life. He rebuked himself for letting them nag in his mind. He was tremendously happy with Pearl.

37

PEARL was not a "solitary bird" like her husband. She liked company. She was restless, a little moody, even, if she did not have people to talk and laugh with her. Brandon was not quite enough as an audience.

"I'm happiest in a crowd," she told him. "I like to be surrounded by people. I love the buzz of the human beehive. I have a horror of loneliness."

"I'm a permanent cure for loneliness," said Brandon. "That's where I come in as a husband."

Yes—she liked to have him near her. She couldn't do without him. But she wanted the crowd as well, and she invited it to tea in St. Leonard's Terrace and sometimes to dinner, and often after dinner when coffee was handed round by Kemp to a multitude—they looked like that to Brandon—of young women with a gift of laughter, and men who seemed to know Pearl better than her husband did, or, at least, longer.

She had met some of them on her wanderings abroad—a little Italian tenor who kissed her hands and then clasped his own and put them to his heart as though overcome by her loveliness, and the usual Russian princess with black hair looped above her ears, who had served in a tea shop at

Monaco before setting up a hat shop in London, and a young peer with a name famous in history who had married a shop girl in Oxford and was in the male chorus at the Gaiety. Then there was an announcer of the British Broadcasting Company who said, "Good-night, Everybody!" as though he loved all his listeners, and reminded Pearl that he had been desperately enamoured of her when he was a pup lieutenant in the Air Force with occasional spells of leave from bombing over Bruges. Now he had a wife —"a poor thing but mine own" he said when he brought her along—and a baby who alarmed him by its abnormal intelligence.

"My dear Pearl," he said, in that rich and tender voice which thrilled a million people with wireless sets, "how strange are the workings of destiny. But for an air raid which interrupted my boyish eloquence in Piccadilly, you might have been the wife of an announcer on the B. B. C., and my baby would have had brown eyes instead of blue. Strange, strange!"

"I'll box your ears, Jumbo, if you go on like that," said his wife, who was a fair little thing with forget-me-not eyes. But it was only sham indignation, and she laughed as she slapped her husband's hand.

Pearl laughed too, and glanced at Brandon, who could see no humour in this remark.

"A thousand years ago!" she said, "but you're still deplorable. . . . This is Frank."

Jumbo, as his wife called him, nodded to Brandon.

"You'll have to give us a talk one night," he suggested. " 'How to write a best seller.' Every unsuccessful novelist—ten millions of them—will listen with bated breath. We'll have it broadcast to all stations. 'We have here to-night Mr. Francis Brandon, the author of that remarkable novel *The Way of Escape* . . .' "

"I'm afraid not," said Brandon coldly.

He took an instant dislike to this good-looking humorist. He felt a cold shiver down his spine at the thought of speaking over the wireless. He didn't like Pearl's evening parties.

Her brother was there now and then. It was that brother who once, on a tennis court in Surrey, had asked whether Brandon was the piano tuner. Now he took him for granted as a brother-in-law and was quite civil but slightly ironical.

"Writing another novel?" he asked, on his first appearance, and he smiled and showed his white teeth as though novel writing were an amusing and ridiculous form of time wasting.

"It's my job," said Brandon.

"Quite. And fairly profitable, I should say. I can't say I read your last. Too many novels, don't you think?"

Brandon did think so, but he resented this supercilious remark.

"Too many lawyers also," he suggested.

Young Jerningham smiled and agreed.

"A highly congested profession. If I didn't play a decent bridge hand I should starve to death."

He didn't look on the verge of starvation. He wore extremely elegant evening clothes and always drove up in a two-seater car, generally with an expensive-looking young woman who called him Jip. Not the same young woman, but a succession of young women, rather beautiful and not unintelligent, but somewhat noisy in Brandon's drawing room.

"Does your brother keep all these young women?" he asked Pearl one day. "He seems to have an endless supply of pretty ladies."

Pearl defended her brother's reputation.

"He dances with them, skates with them, and plays bridge with them. Probably he flirts with them, being a male Jerningham and therefore a philanderer. As far as I know, that's all. When I go to his rooms in Gray's Inn there are no signs of female occupation. No lipsticks on his mantelpiece, no face creams in his bathroom!"

"Why doesn't he marry one of these creatures?" asked Brandon. "They seem to like him."

Pearl shrugged her shoulders.

"Poor old Jip can't afford a wife just yet. Precious few briefs, poor boy. Of course, Father has to subsidize him occasionally. Then he makes a bit at bridge."

Brandon raised his eyebrows.

"Do you mean to say he makes an income at the bridge table? Does he play to make money?"

"Of course," said Pearl. "People don't play bridge nowadays for the fun of the thing, except in the suburbs. Some of these young women play for their pin money and dress themselves on what they win. Clever of them!"

"What happens when they lose?"

Pearl smiled elusively.

"Not so good! Very rough on poor Papa. Sometimes rather tragic for themselves. I could tell you some hair-raising tales of girls in debt to quite unpleasant men. But I hate to shock your simple soul, Frank. And I don't like telling tales out of school."

"I shouldn't invite that kind of girl to tea, if I were you," said Brandon. "I don't like to think that you belong to a rotten crowd."

"Puritan!"

She laughed at him over the breakfast table, and again when he made a plea for some quiet evenings.

"I want to get you to myself sometimes. Away from the mob, Pearl."

"Do you want to keep me like a child wife in India? Aren't you rather greedy, my beloved? To-night, as a matter of fact, we're going to Noel Coward's new show. We shall be alone in the third row of the stalls. You can hold my hand when the lights go down, if you'll leave go when the lights go up."

They weren't really alone in the third row of the stalls. Pearl knew the man immediately behind them. She had seen him play tennis at Beaulieu. She had danced with him in the Hotel Negresco at Nice. And in the front row of the stalls two people waved hands to her. They were the portrait painter, Owen Griffith, and his wife, just back from New York. They talked to her between the acts.

"How are you, dear lady?" asked Owen Griffith. "More beautiful than ever, I see without asking. Do you remember that tea we had at Vence in Provence? Your father was there. The sky was blue. There was a smell of mimosa . . ."

Brandon had no conversation with his wife between the acts. The Griffiths were two more people who came to her drawing room to increase her little crowd.

Among them were her relatives who were Jerninghams and wives of Jerninghams, and cousins and second cousins. Brandon could distinguish them in his drawing room without introduction. There was a Jerningham face, or, rather, a family expression. It was something about the eyes and lips, a touch of irony and arrogance, as though they were amused by life and contemptuous of it—as though they belonged to a caste which had come down in the world but still marked them out from the mob.

They were not exactly snobbish or haughty, but they seemed conscious of tradition and ancestry. They all complained humorously of being poverty-stricken. They all believed that England was going to the dogs and that the

Empire was doomed. Pearl's uncle Dick had been a judge in India. "Of course, we shall lose India," he remarked several times. "Meanwhile I live on the dole in a South Kensington boarding house."

Pearl's uncle Alfred was a retired commander in the Royal Navy.

"Of course, we've lost our command of the seas," he said cheerily. "We've crawled to the United States, scrapped our best ships, and axed our officers. In the next war we can't defend the trade routes, and all our little pacifists will starve to death. Serve 'em damn well right."

Pearl's cousin Peter was a squadron commander in the Royal Air Force, and very like Mr. Jerningham, with deep-set eyes and a humorous mouth, and a dark irony in his glance.

"How's the air, Peter?" asked Pearl when he arrived one evening with a pretty wife.

"Not too good, old girl. Nobody bothers about the defence of this unfortunate village. A Socialist government cuts down the estimates while France builds aëroplanes and Germany takes the lead in civil aviation. When the next war starts we haven't a dog's chance. But why worry? There's a good jazz band at the Berkeley. Come and dance there one evening, won't you?"

Pearl's aunt Bee—short for Beatrice—who had a touch of Pearl's charm, though getting on for fifty, had a beauty parlour in Beauchamp Place where she employed some of the young creatures who invaded Pearl's house after shop hours. They were the daughters of impoverished peers, or at least related to a stricken aristocracy, but laughed quite a lot at the joke of life. Aunt Bee announced that she was on the verge of bankruptcy but was cheerful about it. Like most of the Jerninghams, she had a candour of speech which was rather alarming to Brandon as a shy man.

"Well, Pearl, my dear," she said when they first met, "I'm glad to see you married at last. I hope you'll have lots of babies."

"My dear Aunt!" cried Pearl. "Don't exaggerate the possibilities. And aren't you being rather indelicate in a Chelsea drawing room?"

Aunt Bee was surprised to hear her say so.

"Indelicate? What's that? If you heard the conversation that goes on among my little sluts in Beauchamp Place——"

She turned to Brandon and looked him over with a good-natured amusement.

“I’ve read your novel,” she told him. “Wasn’t that doctor of yours a bit of a fool? I don’t believe in idealists who sacrifice themselves for the sake of humanity. Humanity can look after itself nowadays. Or if it doesn’t, it ought to. It gets too much done for it. The lower classes get everything for nothing. It’s people like ourselves who bear all the burdens. Rates and taxes—enough to kill one. Who’s going to support me when I shut up shop in Beauchamp Place after working myself to skin and bone? Any chance of the dole for me? Not on your life! My dear young man, I detest your sympathy with the under dog. He’s a lazy, feckless, pampered fellow. What he wants is a boot in his backside. Pardon my candour, won’t you?”

“Certainly,” said Brandon. “I like to hear your point of view. I think I’ve heard Pearl’s father say the same kind of thing.”

“Oh, Pearl’s father talks through his hat,” said Aunt Bee. “It’s only by accident when he talks a little sense.”

She glanced round the room where Pearl was entertaining her friends, some of those young girls who worked by day and played by night, two of the Jerningham cousins—the daughters of Uncle Dick—the Russian princess, Geoffrey Ward, the painter, and his wife, the young man from the Foreign Office, two naval lieutenants, an elderly colonel just back from Mentone.

“Just like Pearl,” she remarked. “She’ll fill your house with elderly admirers and beggarly relations, and bright young things who are all chatter and no sense. She likes to be in a crowd. It’s because she has lived abroad so much, in hotels and boarding houses. She’ll turn your house into a wayside inn. It’s her father’s blood. He makes friends with everyone he meets and flirts with every pretty woman. If you think you’ve married Pearl, you’re very much mistaken, my dear young man. You’ve married the Jerningham family and all the people Pearl has picked up on her way through the world. They’ll crowd you out. They’ll eat you out of house and home. They’ll make a traffic block in St. Leonard’s Terrace.”

“You alarm me,” said Brandon, smiling at this candid lady.

“Well, I’m telling you,” said Aunt Bee. “And that’s a pretty frock Pearl is wearing. Molyneux, by the look of it. I’m glad you can afford it.”

It seemed a simple frock to Brandon, and Pearl looked exquisite. She was laughing with a naval lieutenant, who sat on a cushion at her feet with his legs tucked up. The room was noisy with the chatter of Pearl’s guests, and it was filled with a thin haze of cigarette smoke and the faint perfume of women’s scent.

It was a strange contrast to Brandon's loneliness in a Surrey cottage to which he had escaped for peace and quiet—to think things out—to write a good book. These people were not quite his own crowd. He did not speak their language. Their minds worked differently from his. He felt a stranger among them. But Pearl was happy. It was splendid to see her happiness, to hear her laughter, to see how all these people paid homage to her. Pearl was wonderful.

It was going to be a little difficult to write his next novel.

38

Mr. Jerningham came home three or four months after Brandon's marriage. He looked remarkably well and in the best of spirits, and was delighted to meet Brandon as his son-in-law.

"Pearl is a lucky wench. After that infernal tragedy, poor darling. I must say, my dear fellow, I think you acted nobly at that time. I'm glad Pearl played the game by you. She always liked you. . . . Congratulations on your big success. By Jove, it's good to hear of someone making a bit of money these hard days! Go on and prosper, my dear lad. Write another masterpiece. Keep on writing them. You've found your public. Splendid! Not that I ever read modern novels, you know. I'm still faithful to my dear Jane, with a bit of Smollett now and then; or Fielding when I feel depressed about the inevitable progress of impending doom. This is a jolly little house you've got. Charming! Charming!"

He came to tea that afternoon, and stayed to dinner, and lingered after midnight, and was extremely amusing about his encounters and adventures on the Riviera. Unfortunately his system had failed. He had had a run for his money, but the bitch-goddess whom men called luck had let him down badly at the end.

"How badly, Father?" asked Pearl.

Mr. Jerningham hedged.

"A bit of a bump," he admitted. "Somewhat of a jar, my poppet. The croupiers raked in my chips with incredible rapidity and ruthlessness. But it was quite amusing. I had a little crowd round me. They were rather astonished at my *sang-froid*. I heard murmurs of admiration regarding the English *milord* who lost his money like a gentleman. It pleased my vanity. I

smiled with a kind of noble insolence when I saw all my winnings grabbed by those relentless rakes."

"It doesn't sound good to me," said Pearl. "How much did you lose, Father?"

Mr. Jerningham shrugged his shoulders.

"I hate being too accurate about my losses. As a matter of fact, old girl, I'm broke for the moment. I may say that, apart from odds and ends and a little bit tied up so that I can't play about with it, I'm without visible means of subsistence. A most painful situation to a man of my tastes!"

He laughed with the greatest good humour and took another cigar from Brandon's box.

Pearl was a little worried, but also a little amused.

"Father, you're incurable! What on earth are you going to do now? Do you honestly mean to say you're on the rocks?"

"Complete shipwreck, Pearl. Not underwritten at Lloyd's. Ruin stares me in the face. I shall have to live at Rowton House and clean my own boots. Extremely annoying!"

"You'll have to live at Harley Green again," said Pearl. "Grandmother won't like it, but I don't see what else one can do about it."

Mr. Jerningham did not seem to like the prospect of living at Harley Green.

"It's like being buried alive!" he protested. "A month or two now and then, when the weather's fine—certainly. But there's no intelligent society in the neighbourhood, and Mother is getting fractious in her old age. You know what she is!"

"What's the alternative?" asked Pearl.

Mr. Jerningham poured himself out another glass of Brandon's port.

"Well, I might look around for a job in town. One or two directors' fees would help me out a little. My name is worth something in the city. Meanwhile, if you happened to have a spare bedroom, and if it didn't bore you to give your old father a shakedown for a month or two—I might put up here for a bit. Not that I want to intrude upon you young people. Turn me out if you feel that I should get in the way. Not that I shouldn't make myself scarce. A room in the attic or down among the beetles in the basement—quite good enough for a disreputable fellow like me. I can always slope off to the club in the daytime. You wouldn't see me between breakfast and bedtime. Of course I only throw out the suggestion as a prodigal father who

doesn't ask for a fatted calf or anything like that. Tell me frankly if you think I should be a nuisance."

"Father!" cried Pearl, "as if you could ever be a nuisance—after all the time I've wandered about the world with you! Of course you can put up here, as long as you like. Frank won't mind, will you, Frank?"

"Not at all," said Brandon, after a slight pause due to intensive thought.

"We have two perfectly good spare rooms," said Pearl.

Mr. Jerningham raised his hand with humorous protest.

"One spare room is quite good enough, my dear."

"When do you want to come in?" asked Pearl.

Mr. Jerningham thought he might as well doss down that night, if his son-in-law wouldn't mind lending him a pair of pajamas. He had dumped his baggage at the club, and it was getting a bit late. He would collect it the following day.

"Well, that's settled," said Pearl.

She put her arm round her father's shoulder and gave him a little hug.

"Father, you're incorrigible! I knew that system was bound to break down. But it's nice to think you're going to stay with us. You're very amusing, you know! You and I have always laughed at the same jokes."

"Well, thank goodness, we keep our sense of humour in times of adversity," said Mr. Jerningham.

He stayed up very late that night after Pearl had gone to bed, and talked brilliantly. He stayed up very late most nights, and was witty, amusing, and genial, but very trying to the patience of a man who wanted to go to bed before his wife was asleep. He came down late to breakfast and discussed the morning's news when Brandon wanted to do some work. He lunched at home when none of his friends invited him to lunch elsewhere. After a nap in the afternoon he played his flute up in his own room. It happened to be a room next to Brandon's study—and Bach played on a flute is distracting to the thoughts of a novelist. There were times when Brandon groaned at the sound of those plaintive notes. There were times when he resented the presence of Mr. Jerningham, especially when he wished to be alone with Pearl. He was seldom alone with Pearl between breakfast and bedtime. She lunched out a good deal. If there were any evening free of friends she was keen to go to the theatre or to dine out somewhere, or to take a taxi to a picture palace to see Maurice Chevalier or Adolphe Menjou, who were great favourites of hers.

"Come on, Frank! Let's go and laugh somewhere. You've written enough for one day."

"Ten lines," he told her one evening. "I'm stuck in the middle of my second chapter. I'm getting worried."

"Well, you must get a little relaxation. Besides, Father wants cheering up. He moons about the house too much. By the by, he's getting shabby, Frank. I don't like to see him going about like that. I've told him to order himself some new clothes and put it down to your account. I suppose that's all right?"

"Rather," said Brandon. "Anything you say, Pearl."

She kissed him on the back of his head as she leaned over his desk.

"You're wonderfully sweet to me, Frank. The best of husbands. I'm absurdly happy."

In his heart he thanked God for that. But it was difficult to write that novel for which his publishers were clamouring. Pearl and home life and happiness distracted his thoughts. He would have to develop his powers of concentration.

39

BRANDON shrank from the publicity which had come to him as a best-selling author. It embarrassed him to see the glint of recognition in the eyes of shop assistants when he gave his name. The girls in Harrod's nudged each other when he passed, having established his identity with the author of *The Way of Escape* by a greatly enlarged photograph in the book department, which shocked the original when he came face to face with it for the first time. Good heavens! Did he look like that? Surely it was the portrait of a mental defective, or a cat burglar—a lean-faced fellow with shifty eyes, and thin lips, and a mean sort of look, as if he had robbed a blind man. It was stuck on a pile of books—*The Way of Escape*, by Francis Brandon. 120th thousand.

One of the girls in a Sloane Square shop pushed over a copy of his novel when he paid his bill. "Do you mind signing this, Mr. Brandon? Awful cheek, I know, but if you wouldn't mind . . . ?"

"Not at all."

Brandon used her fountain pen to scrawl his name, and for the life of him could not prevent a flush of colour creeping into his face. Several customers had heard and glanced at him.

"Thanks most frightfully."

"Confound it," said Brandon as he went his way.

The telephone became a terror to him. When it was not ringing up Pearl, he was called down by Kemp—that creepy man—to answer a message from the *Daily Gossip* or the *Weekly Looking-Glass*. Generally it was a woman's voice speaking to him, sweetly, appealingly, urgently.

"Oh, Mr. Brandon, this is the *Daily Gossip* speaking. We should very much like to know what you think about marriage. We're having a little symposium . . ."

Brandon found it impossible to think about marriage. It was like being asked what he thought about life. In any case, why should he think about marriage? He was writing the third chapter of a novel which, so far, had nothing to do with marriage.

"I can't say I think anything about it. . . . I don't know what you mean exactly. . . . I'm very busy."

There was half a column of what he didn't think about marriage in the next number of the *Daily Gossip*, with his photograph inset.

Pretty girls, who looked like Pearl's friends, were shown into the drawing room and desired to interview him for women's weeklies. Being naturally polite to women, he was unable to be as rude to them as he secretly desired. They asked him astonishing questions which he was totally unable to answer on the spur of the moment. "Do you think we shall have a new war?" "Have you any views on birth control?" "Would you mind giving me a list of your favourite authors?" "What book inspired you most in your literary career?" "Do you like dogs?" "What are your hours of work?" "Do you believe in companionate marriage?"

During these interviews Brandon generally sucked an empty pipe or sat looking like a tortured man with his thin hands clasped round his knees. He could think of nothing to say to these eager young women. If he had any thoughts at all about the subjects they suggested, he could only stammer out absurd answers and then beg them, for heaven's sake, not to put down such preposterous nonsense. On the whole they dealt with him kindly. They made up witty remarks for him. They made some kind of sense which read fairly well. More often than not they left out everything he had said and described his appearance, his tricks of manner, his house and his furniture. "Famous

Novelist at Home. Portrait of Francis Brandon. Portrait of the Novelist's Wife. The Author of *The Way of Escape* talks to our Special Interviewer."

Photographers snapped him in the park when he was walking with Pearl. Stealthy-looking young men waited outside his house and took him getting into his car, Pearl's car, as he insisted on calling it.

He came to hate the sight of his face in illustrated papers and bookshop windows. It was becoming known to the general public. He was aware of people glancing at him and whispering to others in restaurants and theatres. Sometimes he overheard what they said, as one night when they left the St. James's Theatre.

"Did you see the man in the third row of the stalls? I believe it was the author of *The Way of Escape*."

"He looked like it. Mr. Sludge, the author of *Slush*."

"Oh, no! I loved it."

Pearl overheard, and laughed on the steps of the theatre.

"It's funny to be so famous, Frank! 'Mr. Sludge, the author of *Slush*.' If that man hadn't gone off in a car I'd box his ears. He's probably one of your unsuccessful rivals."

Brandon was still feeling the effect of this mental and moral shock. It was awful being recognized in public. All those infernal photographers had made him like an advertisement of Johnny Walker.

"Curse the fellow! I wish to heaven I'd never written that confounded novel."

Pearl put her hand on his sleeve.

"No, you don't! You know it's a masterpiece. Don't be so self-conscious, my dear."

He was self-conscious when he sat in an omnibus one day and saw that the girl next to him was reading his novel. Page 250. That bit about Epping Forest and the coster girls. He could feel her give a little shake of laughter. Well, he had laughed himself when he wrote that bit. It was up in his room at Willowbrook Cottage. He had just come back from a walk with Audrey. . . .

For a moment he forgot that girl at his side. He thought back to Willowbrook Cottage, where his mother was, with her sister Alice and his cousin Judy. That country life had suited him. He had been able to think and work. He had loved the trees and the long, lonely walks over the heath and up by Yeoman's Farm. The birds would be mating again. Just about time for

the water wagtails to come back from winter quarters in Egypt. There would be bluebells in the copse below his garden. He hadn't been down there for some weeks. It was a pity Pearl liked town life best. She didn't care to go to Harley Green after that tragedy of Chantry's. The sun was glinting on the buses down Knightsbridge. The larches would be out in Harley Green, and the sun would be gleaming on the smooth trunks of the beech trees beyond the heath. The blackbird would be tuning up. A wonderfully rich note—more musical than the honk of motor horns and the screech of bagpipes outside a corner public house. But Pearl liked London best. All her friends were there. There were more amusements, and she was fond of shopping and so forth. Harley Green was just a dream now, except when he went down for an hour or two to see his mother. . . .

That girl by his side had got to page 262. Astonishing to think that her mind was being peopled by his characters and that his thoughts were becoming hers, in a way. All over England people were still reading his novel. If it weren't for all this publicity which had come to him, he would like to think he was making friends with all sorts of unknown folk—in English—and American—homes. He had a big American public, for some extraordinary reason. Why people in the United States should be interested in his character studies of slum streets in London, he failed to understand. He received an incredible number of letters from American ladies thanking him for "helping" them, and from American college girls telling him that they had been terribly thrilled and would he send his autographed photograph with a quotation from his favourite poet? Certainly not. Why the hell should he? . . .

That morning he had received a long cable—five sheets of typewritten slips—asking him to do a lecture tour from New York to San Francisco. The Women's Clubs of America were anxious to hear him. The Rotary Clubs were asking for him. All expenses guaranteed. Agents' terms sixty-forty of gross receipts. Big money assured. Wide publicity. Minimum of thirty lectures, leading cities. Occasional radio talks. Hospitality offered in many cities. Harvard and Yale Greek letter societies issue invitations handsome terms. Strongly urge acceptance autumn months. And so on.

Brandon had cabled back two words at delayed rates. *Utterly Impossible*. He would rather be boiled in oil. And he had to get down to his new novel. He had very much wanted to put in an evening's work. But Pearl was taking him out to Cochrane's new Revue. Her brother was joining them with one of his pretty ladies. Brandon was paying for the seats.

VAL FOSTER, the pavement artist, as he called himself, is the best authority on the life of Francis Brandon at this period of his career, though one has to accept his statements with a slight discount for humorous exaggeration.

"Shell-shocked by success" is one of the phrases he throws off about his friend.

"Poor old Brandon," he says, "ought never to have written a best seller. He ought never to have got beyond a bed-sitting room in Pimlico or that low-ceilinged cottage in Surrey. He was conscience-stricken by his own prosperity. He was gun-shy of publicity. As a solitary-minded soul, he suffered exceedingly from his wife's delight in the social racket into which she dragged him at all hours. Some people can't bear cats in the room. Poor old Brandon felt the same uneasiness in the presence of a manservant. It curdled his blood when that Uriah Heep helped him on with his overcoat or handed him his hat and gloves. He never used to wear gloves. Of course he ought never to have married Pearl. I warned him, didn't I? His love for her was abject. It was pitiful to see any man such a slave to a laughing lady. He couldn't refuse her the moon if she asked for it. He would climb to the highest chimney pot to grab it for Pearl's sake, even if he broke his neck. Humiliating to a man like me who believes in treating 'em rough.

"Then he was one of those strange, old-fashioned sentimentalists who believe that blood is thicker than water and that one's relations have a right to sponge on one's hard-earned wages. Of course they battened on him—his distinguished father-in-law, his elegant brother-in-law, his mother's sisters, his father's nieces, his poverty-stricken cousins. It was the same with all the cadgers in London. It was ludicrous to go for a walk with him. They spotted him from afar. They gave one glance at his face and walked straight up to it, knowing their man. There was the ostler who had lost his job because of motor cars. 'Poor devil!' said Brandon when he had parted with the inevitable half-crown. There was the pretty slut who had answered an advertisement in Chelsea and had to get back to Woodford without a bus fare. 'Poor child,' said Brandon, after the loss of another half-crown. There was the Welsh miner who had been unemployed for three years and was looking for a shilling to give him a night's lodging. 'Poor wretch!' said Brandon, forking out. 'My dear ass,' I told him, 'you can't keep the whole population of London. Surely you don't believe all these stale old tricks? Why, I've known that ostler for years! The only horse he ever knew was the one he kicked to death. Look at the brute's mouth. He'll get drunk on that half-crown and go back to beat his woman. You ought to be locked up for

encouraging the criminal classes. What's going to happen to me when I want to borrow five quid?"

Brandon sloped round to Foster's studio sometimes—more often, as the months passed. He liked to sit there smoking his pipe while Foster painted one of the London street scenes—from notes and sketches—which were beginning to find a market, mostly in America. Foster, of course, pulled his leg as usual.

"Very good of you to come slumming, old man. Sorry I haven't a butler to hand round the cake. Excuse these uncarpeted boards and general air of destitution. Not the sort of thing you're accustomed to in St. Leonard's Terrace, with its Persian rugs and silken hangings."

"Bunk," said Brandon. "I prefer bare boards."

He amused Foster by a gruesome account of that man Kemp, who was getting on his nerves.

"I caught him reading some of the typescript of my new novel. He was as cool as a cucumber when I asked him what the blazes he was doing. Said he couldn't resist the temptation of reading a few lines before the general public enjoyed the privilege. I could see that he thought it pretty poor stuff."

"Sack him," suggested Foster. "Give him a week's wages and tell him to go and read Proust. That would be a nasty one!"

Brandon said that Pearl liked the man and couldn't run the house without him.

"These servants are very worrying," said Brandon. "I'm getting scared about the parlourmaid. She's been making eyes at me lately when Pearl happens to be out. The other day she gave a little squeal and said, 'Ow, Mr. Brandon, there's another ladder in my stocking. Just look at it!' "

"And did you?" asked Foster.

"The fact is," said Brandon, "I think I shall have to take a workroom somewhere. I get interrupted too much. My worthy father-in-law comes in looking for a box of matches and stays to chat about the situation in India or last night's debate in the House. Then I'm beginning to detest his flute. I want to lift up my head and howl like a dog who hears a concertina."

"Well, it's your own fault," said Foster. "Push him out, laddy, push him out! A mother-in-law is bad enough, God wot, but a father-in-law is hellish."

"Pearl and he are great pals," said Brandon. "They amuse each other vastly. And I must say he's always extremely charming."

“How much does his charm cost you?” asked Foster. “I suppose you feed him and clothe him and provide him with cigars. I’ve no doubt he drinks a good deal of port, doesn’t he? Fond of the theatre, I understand, and only sits in the stalls. No upper-circle seat for Mr. Jerningham!”

Brandon smiled.

“He’s Pearl’s father. I owe him something for that.”

It was in Foster’s studio that Brandon met Audrey Avenel again. She came in to tea sometimes when she was up in town, “looking at life,” as she described it, and Brandon noticed that Foster seemed to anticipate her visits and provided a startling assortment of French pastries.

It was nice to see her again. It brought back memories of Willowbrook Cottage and walks on the heath and a pleasant comradeship. She had not lost her gift of laughter, nor that schoolgirl complexion of which she was rather ashamed, nor her frankness of speech, slightly embarrassing to a shy man like Brandon. She blushed a little when they first met, and Brandon wondered whether she would offer him her cheek again as once in a Surrey lane. But she held out her hand and said, “I’m Audrey,” as though he might have forgotten.

Then she glanced at him, half shyly and half boldly, observing his new lounge suit and well creased trousers.

“How’s Pearl?” she asked. “She didn’t answer my last letter. Too happy, I suppose, the lucky wretch. When is she going to have a baby?”

Brandon hedged about that, and was foolishly embarrassed when Foster laughed and said, “Spare the blushes of a modest man, my child.”

“Sorry!” said Audrey. “I only wanted to know if there’s any chance of being its godmother.”

She adored babies, she declared. She would like to have six of her own, but she didn’t see much chance. She was still living a secluded life in Surrey far from the eligible male.

Foster handed her a cream tart and told her to take her hat off and make herself at home.

“Referring to previous conversations,” he said, “there’s a fellow I know who would make a very kind father. He’s a pavement artist with good prospects in a pleasant pitch. The State will educate his children free of charge. If they get a nuisance he can drown them in the Serpentine.”

Audrey Avenel laughed over her cream tart.

“I’ve heard all that before, Val. You repeat yourself!”

"I'm waiting for an answer," said Foster. "Tell me when Brandon isn't here."

Audrey kept in touch with Willowbrook Cottage, as Brandon knew from his mother's letters. She had chummed up with Judy, who had chucked typing for a time after a nervous breakdown following her father's death.

"She's very grateful to you," said Audrey.

"What for?" asked Brandon.

He was rather annoyed that Judy had mentioned his allowance of three pounds a week. He didn't like that kind of thing blurted about.

"Who's going to toast the muffins?" asked Foster. "I bought them. Let somebody else cook them—curse them."

It was Audrey who toasted them, as well as her own cheeks, and it was while she was doing so that she gave the latest family news. Her father was rampaging about a new by-pass road which was going to strike across Harley Heath and ruin the countryside. The vicar pleaded for a little charity even to motorists. It had raised a hundred local feuds. The village stores thought it would bring new business. Some of the local ladies were hysterical on the subject. A rich pork butcher had bought Yeoman's Farm.

"How's Sylvia?" asked Brandon.

Audrey turned over a muffin and paused a moment before she answered.

"Poor old Sylvia! That marriage wasn't a success. Robin has done a bunk with Jill Mannering. Sylvia is back in the same old hat shop, trying to look brave."

"Good God!" exclaimed Brandon.

Foster shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't like to say 'I told you so.' It's all Brandon's fault. His sickly sentimentalism."

"How on earth do you make that out?" asked Brandon angrily.

Foster made it out quite easily. If Brandon hadn't sheltered that bedraggled boy one rainy night in Surrey, Sylvia would have been "copped" by her father and saved from a painful experience with a degenerate youth. Doubtless also Brandon had encouraged the child Sylvia to believe that she should follow the light of love where'er it led—even into a low-class garage in a back street.

Brandon looked guilty. He felt guilty. He remembered a conversation with Sylvia in which he had told her not to funk the big adventure.

"Mother is broken-hearted about it," said Audrey. "But then she would be, with her pre-war ideas, poor darling."

"That means to say you're not broken-hearted about it?" suggested Foster, buttering one of the muffins as if he were painting a masterpiece. "Explain yourself, woman. Do not spare our old-fashioned sensibilities. Brandon and I also have pre-war ideas. No matter. We should be glad to hear the post-war point of view in all its crudity."

Audrey put down her toasting fork and looked at Brandon as though he would understand.

"Of course, I'm sorry Sylvia has made a mess of things. Robin is a rotter, I daresay. But I think Sylvia is none the worse for her experience. At least she tried things out instead of staying at home fretting at the garden gate, so to speak, gradually degenerating into a thwarted woman. She had the pluck to break away and take a risk. I admire her for that. She's all the better for it. More of a woman. Robin has let her down, the dirty little dog! But she would have let herself down if she had listened to Father and refused to marry him because it wasn't quite safe, because he wasn't earning enough money, because Father thought she ought to help Mother with the dusting and jam-making. Don't you see what I mean, Frank?"

Foster made a solemn protest.

"Of course he sees what you mean. You'll have him shedding tears in a minute if you go on like that. Address your remarks to me, my child. I'm a man of common sense. I should like to point out that if Sylvia had been an obedient daughter she would not have made a squalid marriage with a man who, I am ashamed to say, is related to the family of Foster. She would have been spared many tears and great humiliation."

Audrey quoted some old lines.

> " 'Who ne'er his bread in sorrow ate,
> Who ne'er through weary midnight hours
> Weeping by his bed has sat,
> He knows ye not, ye heavenly powers.' "

"German verse of the worst kind," said Foster. "And these post-war people call themselves modern! Good heavens, I got over that kind of muck when I left off wearing Eton jackets. All I can say is that I'm dashed sorry for Sylvia, although I think she got what she asked for, and if I meet my degenerate cousin I'll take the smile off his face."

"It was Jill Mannering," said Audrey. "She's a bad egg."

Brandon walked with Audrey that evening as far as Sloane Square on her way to Waterloo, and she asked about his next novel and then suggested calling on Pearl one day.

"Of course!" said Brandon. "She wonders why you haven't been."

Audrey stood for a moment by the bookstall outside the Underground before taking a train to Waterloo.

"Happy?" she asked, with a smile that was just a little shy.

"Enormously," said Brandon.

"I'm glad. Give Pearl my love."

She turned quickly and went into the station on the way back to Harley Green.

Brandon stood for a moment by the bookstall where she had left him. She would be seeing his cottage to-morrow. Perhaps she would walk across Harley Heath and through the woods which he had liked so much. The new bracken would be pushing up through last year's stubble. The woodpecker would be laughing in the copse below his garden. She would hear the cuckoo calling for the first time. Rather a shame to miss all that!

"*Paper! Evening Standard! Star!*"

The traffic was rushing as usual round Sloane Square. A lorry missed the body of an absent-minded novelist by three inches. He walked back to St. Leonard's Terrace and let himself into his house with the green shutters. There was a chatter of voices in the drawing room, and women's laughter. Pearl had had another tea party, and her guests were lingering.

Brandon crept past the drawing-room door and went up to his study. Time for an hour's work. Chapter X. Kemp was drawing his window blinds and tidying up the morning papers. Blast the man! Why couldn't he make himself scarce?

"That'll do," said Brandon.

"Thank you, sir," said Kemp.

Outside in St. Leonard's Terrace a piano organ was playing "I've Had a Good Day To-day"! In the next room Mr. Jerningham was practising his flute. A minuet by Bach.

Brandon went round sometimes to the Pen and Palette Club when Pearl was lunching out with friends. Nothing had altered as regards furniture and decoration. On the walls were the same nudes with angular limbs in distorted attitudes, and portraits of celebrities with both eyes seen in profile, or with eyes placed carelessly in odd positions by artists playing the game of "blind pig." The rugs were a little more threadbare, perhaps. The armchairs had sunk into slightly deeper hollows. But Brandon detected a slight change in the moral atmosphere, as far as he was concerned, unless his imagination, his absurd sensitiveness, played him false. It was slightly chilled, he thought. He was not greeted with that warmth which had once welcomed him. There was a perceptible pause, a momentary silence among a group of conversationalists when he strolled into the smoking room and pretended to have a look at the illustrated papers. The group included Mark Ambrose, the critic who had been enthusiastic about a novel which he hadn't read quite carefully—with Bertrand Wix, another critic, Cora Turtle, the author of *Passionate Indiscretions*, and Myrtle Vance, of the *Morning Mercury*.

Brandon caught the eye of Mark Ambrose, who nodded to him rather gloomily and then finished a sentence which had been interrupted by Brandon's entry:

". . . poisonous and pestilential sentimentality shovelled out by the cartload."

"Quite," said Cora Turtle. "Foul!"

Brandon edged towards them. There was a vacant chair among them. He decided to sit in it. He wanted to be friendly with these people. He owed a good deal of his success to Ambrose and Wix. He was extremely obliged to them. If only he weren't so preposterously self-conscious and diffident.

"Any room for a small man?" he asked, with a painful endeavour to be easy-going.

"It's a free chair," said Bertrand Wix.

They ignored him for a minute or two, continuing their conversation as though he were in another world. Myrtle Vance asked Cora Turtle when her new book was coming out. Mark Ambrose said it had a dashed good title anyhow, *The Flaming Spear*. Excellent! It suggested something pretty ruthless. He was looking forward to it.

"Oh, I've let myself go," said the author of *The Flaming Spear*. "It's sure to be banned by Messrs. Boots."

"I hope so," said Bertrand Wix. "That's in its favour."

Cora Turtle shrugged her shoulders.

"What's the good, anyhow? The fool public won't read it. I don't write best seller stuff. I never liked treacle."

Mark Ambrose grinned and raised one finger stained with the nicotine of countless cigarettes.

"Naughty! Don't indulge in 'Passionate Indiscretions,' my dear!"

He glanced sideways at Brandon and raised his eyebrows warningly.

"Oh, sorry," said Cora Turtle. "I forgot our successful friend for a moment. How many thousands now, Frank?"

Bertrand Wix, who was a fat little man with beady eyes, laughed in his high falsetto.

"Thousands? My dear lady, millions. Our friend Brandon has put it across the world. In England his book is a best seller. In America it's a disease. It's sweeping those Dis-united States like an epidemic."

"Not as bad as that!" laughed Brandon uneasily. He detected a note of criticism, almost of hostility, in these remarks, unless he was unduly sensitive to a little legitimate leg-pulling.

Mark Ambrose swung round in his chair and asked a question as though he had been puzzling over it for some time.

"Tell me, Brandon. How do you account for it? What's the trick? It wasn't a bad novel, as novels go, but for the life of me I don't see why people should want to read it as much as all that. It's disconcerting. It's a reflection on my judgment. I must have read it through the wrong glasses. I thought, 'Here's a book written for an intelligent public.' I'm damned if I thought it would appeal to the mass mind. I'm afraid I overpraised it. It simply can't be good if it's read by all the little half-wits!"

Brandon coloured up and laughed and felt extremely uncomfortable. He hadn't expected this direct attack. He had no defense. He couldn't very well plead on his own behalf. They would think he was puffed up with his own conceit.

"Isn't it your fault?" he asked. "If you will write enthusiastic reviews in four papers, you can't blame a poor author if he gets a decent sale."

The high falsetto laugh of Bertrand Wix shrilled through the smoking room.

"That's the point. That's the joke. We're not talking about decent sales. We're talking about indecent sales."

"Besides," said Mark Ambrose, "I don't cod myself personally with the belief that anything I say has the slightest influence on the book-buying

public. I don't review books to sell them. I'm not an advertising agent. I'm a critic. At least, I've always thought so, as an egoist. God forgive me if I'm wrong."

"You're a bit of a liar, old boy," said Myrtle Vance of the *Morning Mercury*. "I notice you praise all the books published by Boodle and Wells. Aren't you their literary adviser?"

Mark Ambrose glowered at the lady through his horners.

"I'm afraid you're being offensive."

"Exactly," said Miss Vance drily. "I meant to be, old dear. You see I'm not published by Boodle and Wells."

"Don't let us get heated, my children," said Bertrand Wix good-naturedly. "Remember we are in the presence of a novelist who belongs to the noble company of best sellers. Let us bow our heads three times before Success. When he drives past us in a Rolls-Royce, let us salute him respectfully and say, 'There, but for grace of God, go I.' "

"Snakes! Look at the time!" exclaimed Mark Ambrose. "I've a shelf full of books waiting for me."

He made a dash for the door, without a farewell nod to Brandon or the others.

"Yes, time to be toddling," said Bertrand Wix.

He too departed without a nod to Brandon. He was in a hurry. Literature could not be kept waiting for his Olympian judgment.

Brandon chatted with the two women, who lingered awhile and then left to add to the number of words of which there is no end.

He was left alone in the smoking room. The members of the Pen and Palette Club were mostly workers and did not remain long after lunch. He sat thinking over the conversation he had just had. Not a soul had congratulated him on his success. They seemed to be annoyed about it. He had lost caste in some way. He was branded with that awful title of best seller—an offence to the nostrils of the fastidious. It was unfair, in a way.

Dickens had been a best seller in his time. He was read by all classes. There were moderns whose work was not limited to a little clique of highbrows, although they stood the test of sincerity and style. Of course his own book had had unusual luck. He didn't deserve his success. But it was these people who had overpraised it. They forgot that, or regretted it.

"Hullo, Frank!" said a familiar voice with a 'cello-like tone. "Why that Hamlet-like melancholy?"

It was Lydia Beaumont, prowling round for a match to light a cigarette, and discovering Brandon in one of his brown studies.

She sat down beside him in one of the armchairs—the one that Mark Ambrose had graced.

"My kingdom for a match!" she cried. "I'm pining for a yellow peril."

Brandon lit her cigarette, which she smoked in the long tube once extended towards him on the other side of his hearth in a country cottage.

"I'm very cross with you," she told him, after scrutinizing him with interest and amusement.

She was very cross with him because he had married another woman.

"You know I loved you, darling. It was very naughty of you to run away from me like that. If I weren't so busy, I should be inconsolable. Thank goodness I find work an anodyne, or is it an antidote? I can't think of the right word for the moment. I had rather a heavy lunch at the Lyceum Club, listening to speeches by Czecho-Slovaks."

She told him quite candidly—with the candour of Lydia Beaumont—that he had missed a good thing in not marrying her.

"I'm beautiful, I'm attractive, I'm witty, and I talk on books once a week over the radio. What a wife for a literary man! We could have had a wonderful time together, darling. Now you've married some pretty-faced thing without an idea in her head, and utterly useless in helping on your literary career."

"You must meet her one day," said Brandon. "She's wonderful."

"Curse the man!" said Lydia Beaumont. "He stabs me to the heart. He reopens my bleeding wounds."

"You'd like Pearl," said Brandon. "She has a keen sense of humour. You would like her laughter."

"I doubt it," said Lydia. "Don't you throw your Pearls before swine like me. You're the man that wrecked my life. . . . Give me a cigarette, darling. This one is damp or something. I think it's wet with a woman's tears. You don't care."

Brandon gave her a cigarette out of a gold case which had been given to him by Pearl as a birthday present. That is to say, Pearl had bought it and he had paid for it. It was a mistake in tactics. He ought not to have brought that case to the Pen and Palette Club. Lydia looked at it disapprovingly.

"Frank," she said, "you're a lost soul."

"Why?" asked Brandon, blenching under this awful indictment.

"You're done for," said Lydia. "The devil has got you by the short hairs, darling. I'm sorry. I've seen other men destroyed in the same way. I hoped it wouldn't happen to you. But it has happened."

"What has? What on earth do you mean?"

Brandon gave his uneasy laugh. He didn't like this kind of conversation.

"Success," said Lydia gravely. "When a novelist becomes a best seller he's dead as an artist. Virtue goes out of him. Never again can he write simply, unaffectedly, subconsciously, and sincerely. He thinks of his big public. He panders to it. He's afraid of offending it. He has one eye on his American sales—fatal, of course. He thinks down to all the foolish women who have asked for his autograph. He tries to repeat his success by developing the same line, instead of striking out for something original, or expressing some other aspect of his own ego. He daren't be real or ruthless any longer. He must be false and faithless to his inmost ideals. Otherwise his sales would drop, and his royalties would wither. Frank, that gold cigarette case is a symbol of your doom. You have sold your soul for gold. You have sold your art for gold. You were an artist when you dressed in shabby old clothes and smoked cigarettes out of paper packets. You'll never be an artist again. You'll never write another novel worth a damn. I'm telling you the truth, darling, believe it or not."

Brandon sprang up from his chair, and paced up and down the room, and strode over to the mantelpiece as though Lydia Beaumont's words had stung him, which was true.

"Damn it, Lydia," he said angrily. "It was you more than anybody who made me a best seller. That talk of yours over the wireless. It made me cringe. I went hot all over because of the praise you poured out. Now you round on me because the book became a success. It's idiotic. It's damnable. People in this club behave as if I'd committed a crime."

Lydia was amused.

"That's exactly what you have done, Frank. The crime of success. Unpardonable to the little heroic failures. We boost the books of our friends, but we hate them when they become best sellers. We hail a new genius, but we dislike it when it is cheered in the market place. In literature and art, Frank, there is only one password of comradeship, and that is poverty. It is in poverty that the little flame of genius burns. We meet our friends in bed-sitting rooms and poky flats and cheap eating houses. The successful artist, the rich literary man, isn't of our confraternity. He has cut himself off. By succeeding he has perished, because success means the destruction of the soul."

She spoke solemnly, portentously, pitifully.

"My poor old Frank, you don't belong to us any more. You have taken a seat among the prosperous. You have been elected, as it were, to the Royal Academy. You are a best seller. You wallow in wealth. We do not recognize you with your gold cigarette case."

"Ten thousand devils!" cried Brandon. "Lydia, for heaven's sake! Are you serious, or are you pulling my leg?"

"I couldn't pull the leg of a gentleman in well creased trousers," said Lydia. "I was speaking quite seriously, Frank. And now I must be going—back to my bed-sitting room. Good-bye, my dear. I'm sorry. . . . *Adieu!*"

She stood looking at him for a moment, touched the tips of her fingers to him, and left him. She had said farewell to an old friend who was dead.

42

Pearl Jerningham, who was now Mrs. Francis Brandon, was very pleased with her husband and always a little amused by him. She could not help laughing at his incurable shyness, his "inferiority complex," as she called his diffidence, his serious idealism which made him worry about other people's unhappiness and feel guilty because he thought he had an undue share of luck, his shrinking from publicity, his timidity in the presence of servants, his moments of amazing absent-mindedness, his occasional nerve storms, and his romantic worship of her spirit and beauty.

It amused her when he came into the drawing room whistling to keep his courage up because she had a few friends there. More often than not his tie had slipped down from his collar, or his hair stuck up behind, or one of his links was unfastened. She would never teach him to look well dressed. She laughed inside herself because of his terror in the presence of Kemp and the furtive way in which he slunk into his own car lest some of his old friends should think he had become a snob and a profiteer. She laughed out loud when he told her, quite frequently, that he would never be able to live up to her, or even look like her husband, because she had such a patrician style, while he belonged to the proletariat. He was alarmed by some of her evening frocks, because, he said, they showed too much of her beauty to the world. He was jealous of anyone seeing her bare arms. And yet, when he came into her room when she sat at the dressing table doing her hair with bare arms, she could see the shyness in his eyes, as though her beauty, as he called it—

she thought he exaggerated that—was almost too wonderful. She could see in the mirror his look of worship and wonderment.

"That candlelight suits you," he said once. "It gives you a kind of mystical look. It puts a glory about your hair."

"Yes, I'm not so good in daylight," she told him, "but I'm sorry you notice it."

Of course he was shocked at that. It was the last thing he had had in his mind.

She bullied him a little, of course. One has to bully a man who can't stand up for himself with his own servants and gets put upon by poor relations, begging letter writers, old friends down on their luck, and all the cadgers of the town. And a wife has to bully a husband who turns up late at a dinner party in his own house because he has been walking through the rain forgetful of time, or steals past the drawing-room door to slink up to his own room when he hears the voice of a stranger.

"Really, Frank," she told him more than once, "I shall be cross with you if you look like a bear with a sore ear every time a few people drop in after dinner. You were quite rude to my little Italian last night. Didn't speak a single word to him. He felt quite uneasy and asked me if he had offended you."

"Sorry," said Brandon. "But why do you encourage the little blighter? Why do you let him kiss your hands?"

He was actually jealous of some of her friends because they called her Pearl, having known her since she was a long-legged thing with a pigtail. One or two of them, like Colonel Rathbone and Sir Mervyn Brice, claimed the privilege as old friends of kissing her cheek, to the extreme annoyance of a sensitive husband who looked miserable for the rest of the evening. Naturally they felt ill at ease with him. Naturally they talked to her rather than to him. Then Frank accused them of ignoring him in his own house and treating him as though he were a hired waiter to hand them drinks.

"They're the most deplorable snobs," he declared. "They're the kind of men who make me see red. I want to rush out and vote Labour. They regard me as an outsider. Of course I am. I loathe their ideas, their manners, and their morals. They regard all foreigners as 'dagoes' and believe in treading on the necks of the lower classes. They yearn for a Mussolini in England to bludgeon the nation into discipline."

"And all that," cried Pearl, "because a white-haired colonel who used to nurse me on his knee had the temerity to give me a chaste salute! Frank,

you're making yourself ridiculous. You're losing your sense of humour."

She had to be cross with him one night because he slipped out of the drawing room when she had a party including her little Russian princess and didn't come down again.

"I hope your husband isn't unwell?" remarked the Russian lady.

Pearl went in search of him. She found him in his study, tapping away on his typewriter.

"Frank!" she cried. "You're a renegade. Everybody wonders what has happened. Now, come down and make yourself pleasant. I can't let you be so unsociable."

For the first time they had something almost like a quarrel.

"I have my work to do," he said with a kind of strained intensity. "How am I going to write a novel if you crowd the house with these absurd people, these chattering women, these empty-headed noodles who flirt with you while I stand with my hands in my pockets wondering where I come in? You must understand that I'm a writing man. I can't concentrate with so many people in the house—and all these late evenings. I feel a wreck next day. Why can't we live more quietly? Why can't we push all these people out and love one another in a little sanctuary of our own?"

"Frank," said Pearl, "are you coming down or aren't you? I can't leave my guests."

Of course, he went down with his arm round his wife, asking for forgiveness in whispers which made her laugh again and forget how angry she had been with him.

Not really angry, except for a moment or two. He was a baby really, a spoilt child who had been overcherished by his mother and was very nervy and highly strung. She had to make allowances for all that. She had to be patient with his introspection when she lost him for a time because he was utterly absorbed in that novel he was writing. Sometimes at breakfast he would sit with that hag-ridden look and not hear a word she was saying about some exciting news in the papers or the new frock she thought of getting, or the dinner they were going to that evening with Uncle Dick, who had invited some people to meet them. At such times he forgot his manners.

"The marmalade, Frank, for the third time of asking."

"Oh, I'm frightfully sorry, darling. I was in a brown study. That next chapter of mine."

He passed her the sugar.

He kept her waiting for three quarters of an hour in a restaurant where she had arranged to meet him for lunch. He arrived in a taxi, looking pale and haggard.

"My darling! Please forgive me! I was finishing a chapter. I was absolutely horror-stricken when I looked up and saw the time."

"It's quite all right," said Pearl. "The manager thought I was trying to pick up one of his customers. An old gentleman raised his hat and said he had met me before and would I have lunch with him. It's perfectly all right, Frank. Your work comes first. Don't worry about a troublesome wife. Literature before love."

Perhaps she had been too ironical. She made him tragically unhappy until she smiled at him over the luncheon table.

They were utterly different. She understood that. They had no ideas in common. Why should they have? Instinctively he was democratic. She wasn't, being the daughter of her father. His sympathy was on the side of people living in mean streets. She tried to forget them and their squalor. It made life miserable to think about them. He had a sneaking fondness for squalor, which he called simplicity. She liked comfort and, if possible, a little luxury. He loved the country, and she hated it. He was bored with parties, dances, and even with theatres if he went more than once a fortnight. "Life would be endurable but for its pleasures," he told her more than once.

"Haven't we enjoyed ourselves enough?" he asked one evening at about eleven o'clock when they were at a dance together in a Mayfair house.

"Good heavens!" she cried. "You don't want to be going yet, Frank? Look at my programme. I shan't get through till two o'clock. You'll have to stick it out."

He hated to see her dancing with other men. She came across him during that evening looking like a skeleton at the feast. She felt sorry for him because he was so wretched, and cut one of her dances to sit out with him.

"You don't seem to be having a good time, Frank!"

He admitted that he was having a hellish time.

"This isn't my crowd. I wasn't brought up to this kind of thing. I want to kill that fellow who plays the saxophone."

"Don't you like to see me happy?" she asked him.

That made his conscience-stricken. She could always get under his guard by that question.

"You're looking terribly beautiful to-night," he told her.

"Why 'terribly'?"

"Because I'm not the right kind of husband for you. You ought to have married a Guardee eight feet high with blue eyes and a golden moustache. I look like your hairdresser. And I feel like a worm."

"You haven't changed your socks, Frank! You've got red clocks on them. Didn't Kemp put your things out?"

"Yes, but I ignored the socks. The fellow kept hovering round like a bit of ectoplasm. I told him to clear out."

Pearl laughed again. He kept her amused. And she loved him for his absurdities as well as for his serious self.

"I'm sorry you don't like parties, Frank. But it is ridiculous of you to pretend that you feel like a worm. You ought to feel like a famous novelist. I'm just nothing, except the wife of Francis Brandon who wrote *The Way of Escape*. People whisper it about. The most attractive-looking women pretend they know me and beg me to introduce them to my distinguished husband. There's one of them edging this way. It's Lady Lavington, the wife of the Air Minister. She told me that she adores your novel and wants to talk to you about it."

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Brandon. "Can't we edge off? Let me get you an ice or something."

He made a rapid escape but was caught later in the evening, not only by Lady Lavington, but by six other women who had read his novel and discussed it at great length.

"It must be splendid to be a best seller," said one of them, who had literary leanings and wrote verses for *Time and Tide*, and had won three cross-word competitions. "Do tell me how you get your plots. Do you think first of your background, or do you build it round your central character?"

"I haven't the least idea," said Brandon. "I don't think I ever have got a plot. Anyhow, I would rather be a bootmaker."

"You're teasing me!" said the lady, who was elderly but arch. "You don't like condescending to my inferior intelligence. Oh, you successful literary men! So proud! So aloof!"

She wondered if he was helped at all by unseen presences. Was he ever directed or guided? Sometimes, when she wrote things in her humble way, she felt that her words were dictated by friendly souls. Or perhaps she just dipped into the Universal.

Pearl saw him struggling with this psychic lady. She saw the appeal in his eyes. As clearly as possible he called to her: "*For the love of heaven, take me away, darling!*"

She took him away, cutting her three last dances with agreeable men who wilted at her decision.

They took a taxi home, and she tucked her arm under his and snuggled up to him.

"You're a gloomy husband, but you know I love you. Of course, you ought never to have married me. I'm a Jerningham. I have a jig in my blood. You ought to have married a girl who could knit your socks and listen with rapt attention while you read out your masterpieces."

"Am I such an egoist?"

"You're a novelist. Isn't it the same thing?"

"I'm your lover. I want to have you more to myself."

"Greedy!"

"And I must get more time for work. It's two o'clock. I shall stagger down to-morrow feeling like a boiled haddock. One can't create stuff feeling like a boiled haddock."

"Why not a boiled cod?" asked Pearl. She pulled his head down and kissed his ear.

"I've enjoyed myself vastly. I should have enjoyed myself more if you hadn't looked so miserable. We'll stay in bed till eleven."

Mr. Jerningham was waiting for them when they came home. He had kept the kettle boiling in case Pearl wanted a cup of weak tea. He had put on his dressing gown of flowered silk and looked very distinguished in it.

"By the by, Frank," he said, "I want to talk to you about a little scheme I have for making a bit of money. There's a fellow I know who has invented a wonderful gadget for dealing and shuffling cards. You put in the pack, and out they come, neatly placed for a bridge hand. Saves a lot of trouble. No possibility of cheating. Very suitable for clubs. He's willing for me to come in with him if I plank down a couple of hundred."

"If I were you, I wouldn't, Father," said Pearl. "Besides, where are you going to get the couple of hundred?"

Mr. Jerningham avoided a direct answer. He enlarged on the merits of the invention, and the almost certain profits. He was still enlarging on this subject when Pearl went to bed.

"Have another whisky, my boy?" he suggested genially. "You look a bit fagged this evening."

"I want to go to bed," said Brandon.

"Oh, just a spot. It's early yet. If you could see your way to let me have that small amount it would be a very profitable investment. Not that I want to press you, of course. I know Pearl is a costly young woman. Pretty frocks. Lots of entertaining. This charming house. All that costs money. But now that you're at the top of the tree as a novelist, with a big public waiting eagerly for your next production, a couple of hundred is not enormous, after all. I should feel more at ease if I could make a bit of money for you, my dear lad. It would be a great pleasure to me. I should like to repay."

"Oh, Lord, no!" said Brandon. "You needn't worry about that. But I am very tired to-night. Let's leave it."

Mr. Jerningham couldn't leave it very well. His friend wanted an immediate answer. There were lots of other men ready to finance him. It was a favour, really.

Brandon wrote the check before he went to bed.

"Aren't you coming, Frank?" cried Pearl, appearing in her pajamas and looking adorable.

43

As time passed Pearl did not see so much of her husband as in the early days of their marriage. Sometimes she missed him and felt a little bored without him. It was partly his work. He had to get down to it, he said. As a matter of fact, he went up to it, shutting himself up in that study at the top of the house, where he locked his door because he hated the interruptions of Kemp and the maids, who wanted to dust his desk or fuss about. He did not refuse to go out with her as he used to, but put up a passive resistance. Couldn't her father take her to that lunch? Couldn't her brother take her to the Smedleys for that supper dance? Would she mind very much if he didn't join that crowd at the skating rink? He wanted to do a spot of work. . . . Of course, she understood that. She didn't want to interfere with his work, but it made her feel lonely sometimes. And this work of his was like drug-taking, she thought. It had the effect of drugs. She noticed that he became restless if he remained away from his study for more than three hours. A film came over his eyes. He was busy with his own thoughts, dwelling with his imaginary

characters. She spoke to him sometimes and he didn't hear a word she was saying until she slapped his hand to wake him up to reality.

"Wake up, Frank! You've forgotten me. I want to talk."

"Sorry, darling. I was thinking of that infernal novel of mine. It doesn't work out. I've got into a hopeless tangle."

"Bother your novel! There's life going on. Look at that girl powdering her nose. That's Tallulah Bankhead. Hasn't she got an interesting face?"

He had a guilty look one day when she tapped at his door and asked to be let in.

"What's the matter, darling?"

"I'm bored, Frank. I'm a lonely woman. I'm getting desperate. I've been sitting like the Lady of Shalott, watching life out of the window. It isn't good enough. I want to escape."

"But, my dearest lady, didn't we go to the theatre last night? Aren't we going to dinner—alas—with Aunt Bee this evening? Don't you live in a whirl of gaiety?"

"I fail to see the whirl this afternoon," she told him. "Father has gone to Sandown. All my friends have abandoned me—most of them have to earn their living, poor dears—and this dreadful loneliness is getting on my nerves. Can't you stop writing?"

He stopped writing, but reluctantly. He returned to it when Mr. Jerningham came back from Sandown, having lost a fiver on the favourite.

It was not only his work which took him away from Pearl. She noticed that he went to see his mother at Willowbrook Cottage more frequently. He pined for country air, he said, and felt the need of a long walk beyond the London pavement. He wanted to blow the cobwebs out of his eyes. He wanted to get away now and then from the ceaseless din of London traffic. Of course he always asked her to go with him, and she had driven him down now and then. But the truth was that she didn't get on very well with Frank's mother. That little woman was polite but cold. Pearl knew that Mrs. Brandon did not approve of her and disliked her for taking away her son. She made little comments about her daughter-in-law's frocks.

"Charming. But rather expensive, I should say! I've never been able to afford a dress like that. Not that I should, of course."

An accusation of extravagance, quite unwarranted. Pearl limited her dress allowance to a very moderate sum compared with some of her friends. Besides, Frank could afford it.

Mrs. Brandon had a secret grievance, it seemed, because Mr. Jerningham lived with them in St. Leonard's Terrace. Frank had let that out one day.

"It's a bee in her bonnet," he said.

"Does she expect us to turn him out into the street?" asked Pearl. "He doesn't cost us much, after all, Frank, and I owe everything in the world to him."

"Rather!" said Brandon.

"Besides," said Pearl, "what about your mother's relatives? I think it's going a bit too far to give that girl Judy an allowance. She's perfectly capable of earning her living again. Then there's that charming lunatic of yours, Martin Merrivale, with his tribe of babies. I don't see why he should expect you to pay his rent and his doctor's bills and all the tradesmen who want a bit on account. They're bleeding you, Frank. They're sponging on you. They seem to take it for granted that you have inexhaustible wealth."

"One must help a bit," said Brandon. "One can't be selfish. Still, I confess I'm getting a bit worried. I shall want all I get when my new novel comes out. And it's not finished yet. Six more chapters to go."

They took an unconscionable time, those six chapters, and Pearl was anxious to know that he had written "The End." She had decided that they would celebrate the event by a month or two on the Riviera. Beaulieu. They might take a little villa. Of course, her father would go with them. And if the villa were large enough they might put up Aunt Bee, who had not been well lately. She felt in need of a change herself. She was getting the old restless feeling. After a year of marriage she was just a little tired of St. Leonard's Terrace and tea parties and London life. She wanted to see a blue sky again and fresh faces. She had a jig in her blood, as she told Frank. A year in one place was a rather desperate business. She had never spent twelve months in one place for years. She had gone wandering with her father from one country to another, meeting amusing people, making new friends. It didn't look as if she were going to have a baby. They were both sorry about that. But if there were no babies she would have to invent some way of avoiding boredom. She felt it creeping upon her stealthily. She could see its grim and ghastly presence near at hand when Frank was upstairs behind a locked door. She would have to take up something. Golf? No, she hated golf. Skating wasn't too bad, but it was an indoor game, and there was no thrill in it. Hunting? Frank couldn't afford that, and she wasn't keen on country life. Flying. . . .

Young Avenel had come to dinner one night with his sister Audrey, who was very fond of Frank. He was in the R. A. F. and had thrilled her by his

description of flying. He had been given his pilot's certificate in a fortnight.

"It's quite easy," he said. "You ought to get a Moth, Mrs. Brandon. It doesn't cost much, and it would be extraordinarily amusing. You would look awfully well in an airman's kit."

"Far too dangerous," said Brandon. "Don't suggest such an idea, my lad. Pearl takes too many risks as it is. She passes everything when she drives down the Portsmouth Road."

Dick Avenel laughed and pooh-poohed the danger.

"It's safer than motoring. Look at the statistics. It's a dashed sight more risky to travel in a French train. Besides, why be safe?"

"Bravo, Dick!"

Pearl rather liked those words, "Why be safe?" It stirred the Jerningham blood in her veins. She liked to hear such words from a boy of the post-war crowd. It showed they had the same old spirit. Mr. Baldwin's "Safety First" didn't suit the English character. A Moth? Yes, it would be rather fun. And she certainly would look well in an airman's kit. It would kill boredom, anyhow, and she was getting tired of tea parties and her little Italian tenor and Uncle Dick and her Russian princess, and Aunt Bee and girls who served in hat shops, and effeminate young men who talked nonsense about neurotic books. . . . Flying? It would be a great adventure. Young Avenel had put an idea into her head which she couldn't get out again.

She spoke to Frank about it one night when she was undressing.

"Frank, darling, what would you say if I took up flying? Would you like to buy me a Moth out of the proceeds of your next novel? I'm rather keen on it. I'm rather excited about it. Don't you think it would be great and glorious?"

She could see his face in the mirror, a sudden look of consternation.

"Pearl, for heaven's sake! Don't talk nonsense. You make me shiver at the idea. I shouldn't have a moment's peace."

He had his braces hanging down and held an evening shoe in one hand, and looked like a man startled by an armed burglar.

She laughed at him.

"Don't look so terror-stricken! It's only an idea of mine."

"Forget it," he implored.

Somehow she couldn't forget it. The idea of it came to her like a temptation when she sat alone—so often now—while Frank was upstairs

writing, writing, writing with a click-clack of his typewriter, as she could hear when she passed his door.

Lots of people were learning to fly. There were any number of clubs. It would be marvellous. The most thrilling adventure in the world. And she had the nerve for it. She knew that. There was nothing the matter with her nerves. It would be far better than foolish flirtations with other women's husbands by which bored wives tried to forget their weariness. She was afraid of getting bored. That great-aunt was a warning. She had been very naughty because she was very bored. Flying might be good for the wife of a novelist.

But Frank was absurdly distressed when she mentioned the subject again. Well, she would have to drop that idea. The next best thing was the villa at Beaulieu.

44

BRANDON'S new novel had cost him an unaccountable amount of mental agony. It was due partly to the difficulty of combining married life with literary creation. Before Pearl began to get tired of her miscellaneous friends he had been so grievously interrupted that anything like unbroken concentration was out of the question. He had to work at odd hours and often when he was mentally fatigued by late nights and the strain of social life in London. He hated being neglectful of Pearl. It was always hard for him to shut himself up in his study when there was any chance of having her to himself. It was even difficult to be uncivil to Mr. Jerningham when that elderly aristocrat felt in need of conversation, or at least of somebody to listen to him, or when he suggested a brisk walk round the Park to shake his liver up and see a pretty woman or two. Brandon's study lured him, but he felt guilty when he locked the door against all intruders.

But it had to be done. There was the financial end of things to consider. He was spending a lot of money in one way and another, and *The Way of Escape* had been a success but not a gold mine. And there was his art, if novel writing could be called an art nowadays. He had the creative urge. Money or no money he would have to go on writing until his hand faltered on his typewriter and the little bell rang for the last time.

Lydia Beaumont's pronouncement of doom, because he had joined the list of best sellers, made his novel more difficult to write. It made him self-

conscious and self-critical. At the end of each chapter he wondered if he were "pandering to his public," if he were writing sincere stuff or thinking about his readers in America, if he were trying to repeat a success without inspiration or by some trick of technique. He had to tear up some of the stuff he had written because it seemed to him second class according to his own standards. Then he had to write it all over again, and the second version was not so good as the first. Two thirds through, he despaired, as usual. He was convinced that it was rubbish, and that anyhow he could not work it out to its bitter and abominable end. Then one night he wrote "The End" and felt a sense of enormous relief. Good or bad, it was done. Good or bad, it would be published, and he would get a heavy sum on account of royalties, much needed. That evening he was idiotically cheerful and almost hilarious. Pearl suspected him of having drunk a glass of wine too much and was much amused. Mr. Jerningham raised his glass at dinner and, with that charming grace which was always his gift, drank to the luck of the new book.

"What do you call it, dear boy?"

"*Success.*"

Mr. Jerningham approved of the title.

"That's good. I like that. Every poor devil down on his luck—about twenty millions of them in this misgoverned country—will want to read that novel to cheer himself up. 'Success' has a nice warm sound at a time when we could all do with a bit. I hope your publisher will put a good cover on it. A 'jacket,' don't they call it? I suggest a picture of a good-looking fellow stepping into a smart restaurant with a pretty girl, elegantly dressed. Rich furs. A tiara. A blaze of light. It's the vision every little typist girl has in her dreams. It's the memory which every old fogey—like me—loves to recall. That evening at the Ritz with the beautiful *comtesse*—— *Eheu fugaces!* It's bound to be a best seller, my dear fellow. *Success*—an excellent title!"

"What's it all about?" asked Pearl. "I don't think I got farther than the third chapter. What did you do with your funny little man? He was making bicycles in Tooting or somewhere. He was just going to marry a girl who dropped her aitches."

"He went in for making motor cars afterwards," said Brandon. "It was in 1900, when they were in the elementary stage. He became a kind of Henry Ford in an English way. He didn't know what to do with his money. His wife didn't like entertaining his rich friends at Hampstead. He sent his son to Eton, and he was killed in the war. And so on. I won't bore you with it."

He had been hurt—foolishly—when he had read out the first three chapters to Pearl. It was his own fault, because he chose his time badly. She

was thinking of the new frocks she had ordered. They were interrupted by telephone calls. Then someone was shown up into the drawing room. Afterwards she had made a few comments.

"Isn't it rather squalid, my dear? I mean, do people really like to read about a funny little man who makes bicycles at Tooting?"

It was Mitcham, really, but that didn't matter. He had decided that it was better not to read out his chapters any more. Pearl wouldn't be amused. She was not much of a novel reader, anyhow. If she had to sit still and read, she liked romance about well-to-do people living in villas on the Mediterranean, or mystery stories about beautiful spies.

It was when he read the proof sheets that Brandon decided he had written a good novel. He could always judge a book better when it was in type. And after a lapse of two months he came to it fresh. It was better than *The Way of Escape*.

There was a kind of inevitability in its movement. The development of his chief character through poverty to success was really strong. One saw into the mind of the man, his ambition, his sense of power, his ruthlessness, and his weakness—his weak affection for that boy of his whom he sent to Eton and who disappointed him. It seemed absurd that an author should shed tears over his own characters, but Brandon had wet eyes when the father heard of the son's death in France.

"Damn it," said Brandon in his study with these proof sheets, "I believe it's almost great, that chapter. The whole thing is streets ahead of *The Way of Escape*. It's stronger. It's bigger. It rises to tragedy."

His agent thought so too, and wrote to congratulate him.

> "*I was nervous*," he wrote, "*lest you should not live up to the quality of* The Way of Escape. *It's always difficult to follow up a best seller. My dear Brandon, I am enthralled by* Success. *It is, if you will allow me to say so, a very big book indeed. Arnold Bennett and Company will have to look to their laurels. A thousand congratulations. Wait till the royalties roll in.*
>
> "*We'll paint London red with it. I'm arranging for very special publicity.* Success *is a great title. We'll have it in all the tubes. Boodle and Wells are going all out on it.*"

Brandon handed over this letter to Pearl at the breakfast table, and she read it with delight.

"That's fine, Frank! 'Wait till the royalties roll in.' That's what I like to hear. We'll get that villa at Beaulieu. I've been looking at advertisements. There's a darling place going ridiculously cheap. I must say I like being the wife of a successful novelist. Come and give me a kiss on the strength of it."

They kissed over the coffee pot in the front room of a Queen Anne house in St. Leonard's Terrace.

"Tut, tut, what's all this, what's all this?" asked Mr. Jerningham, coming down to breakfast in his dressing gown. "Love-making at nine o'clock on a gray morning? A year after marriage! Absurd! Unreasonable! What do I eat this morning?"

He lifted a silver cover and decided that he would eat some good-looking sausages.

"Father!" cried Pearl, "Frank has done it again! Another masterpiece. We needn't lapse into squalor just yet."

"Good," said Mr. Jerningham. "I should hate to leave this nice little house. I dislike the idea of sleeping on the Embankment. Has anyone seen the *Morning Post*?"

45

"*Success*" did not please the critics—or the more important critics. It was not a question of damning with faint praise. They damned it with bell, book, and candle. They damned it in the morning newspapers and the weekly illustrateds. They reiterated their condemnation in the Sunday papers. The poorly paid reviewers of provincial papers took their cue from the more illustrious members of their craft. It began with a column of criticism from Mark Ambrose. It became a chorus after Lydia Beaumont had dealt with the novel in her weekly talks on the wireless.

Brandon read these critical notices of his book as they arrived in little buff wrappers—they used to be green—from a press-cutting agency. At first he opened them at the breakfast table and sat reading them instead of getting on with his food, and could not hide his distress. Afterwards he took them up to his study and opened them there and was able to groan in private. Later still he pitched them straight into the fire without reading them.

The keynote of this criticism had been struck by Mark Ambrose. He was frankly disappointed, he wrote. The author of *The Way of Escape*,

overpraised, he thought, by many of his contemporaries, had failed to fulfil the promise of that earlier book, which, by some unaccountable freak of psychology, had thrilled the simple souls of the "groundlings" and obtained the vulgar distinction of becoming a best seller, an almost certain proof of sentimentality and bad craftsmanship.

Nevertheless, *The Way of Escape* had revealed some quality of thought, some gleam of inspiration, some touch of sincerity, which entitled the author to the sympathetic consideration of serious critics, even though its flagrant appeal to the mob mind might prejudice the fastidious. In *Success* none of the quality of the previous novel had appeared. The author had deliberately chosen a theme which might pander to the instincts and emotions of the middle-class mind—that stale old theme of enormous wealth coming to a man of the people, lifting him from squalor to luxury, from servitude to power, from a little house in Peckham to a mansion in Mayfair. Is it not the most familiar plot of the movies—and now of the talkies—especially when produced by the American mind to whom financial success is the highest form of romance?

> "*Doubtless Mr. Brandon knows his public and has discovered the trick by which he induced them to clamour for his last novel at the libraries. He knows that this dream of wealth lurks in the subconsciousness of every little clerk and shop assistant, and the little clerk's sweetheart and the shop assistant's best girl. It is the eternal story of Cinderella, the deathless drama of Aladdin, irresistible in its appeal to the half-baked mind and the passionate desires of the poverty-stricken. It is impossible to blame an author for handling anew some common and familiar theme. Shakespeare did so. Balzac did so. Arnold Bennett does so. Miss Eunice Bloggs has done so in that exquisite, delicate, and altogether satisfying novel*, The Slander of the Salamander, *which I reviewed in this column two weeks ago. But that common and familiar theme must be transmuted into new metal. It must be invested with new dignity. It must have new wine poured into old bottles. It must take on the touch of the modern spirit. It must reveal some new skill of craftsmanship. It must see life from some new angle of vision. We moderns demand that it shall be liberated from any strain of false sentiment and deal with life as it is to-day, ruthlessly, if need be, brutally, above all things intellectually. Here Mr. Brandon has disappointed those who hoped in his future. It is indeed a bitter disappointment. He has not regarded his story or his characters*

intellectually. They emerge through a mush of sentiment. The scene in which his rich man hears of the death of his son at the front is, frankly, an offence against the art of fiction. It is false emotion. It is almost disgusting. It is like the sob of a transpontine actor standing in the limelight with his eyes uplifted to the third row of the gallery. Really, Mr. Brandon. Please! Please!"

There was more of it—a column of it. Brandon read it with a tuck between his eyebrows, and a twisted smile. Was his novel as bad as all that? Had he committed the unpardonable sin? Mark Ambrose had jumped on his stomach. He felt winded. He couldn't ignore criticism like that. Perhaps it was true. . . .

He went through his novel again, reading it nervously, with a sense of despair creeping into his brain. Certainly there were emotional scenes in it. He had believed them to be sincere and strong. But how could he tell? No man can be a judge of his own work. The only test of quality is its effect upon other minds. To Mark Ambrose it read like false sentiment. To Mark Ambrose it was almost disgusting. And Mark Ambrose would repeat—and did repeat—this sensation of disgust, in three of the morning papers with enormous circulations, and one Sunday paper which was very influential.

Mr. Wix was also disappointed. In a kind way he suggested that the author seemed to have written his novel when his brain was tired.

"*It is*," he said, "*the work of a tired man. It lacks spontaneity. It is the flogging of a dead horse. Mr. Brandon's characters never come alive. They are puppets stuffed with sawdust. Prick them with a sharp scalpel of literary judgment and dust trickles out, not rich red blood. Frankly, I am bored with his rich old man, because I do not believe in him. All his minor characters are like the waxworks at Madame Tussaud's, and especially like the waxworks in the Chamber of Horrors, wearing the fusty clothes in which they committed their uninteresting murders. One's gorge rises at them. The scene in which the father—a wealthy manufacturer—hears of the death of his son at the front, made me—shall I confess it?—slightly sick. It was not the sickness that comes from a sense of horror, still less from the divine shudder of tragedy, but the sickness one has at the sight of an old man betraying the dignity of age by the imbecility of self-pity. Mr. Brandon's last novel was a 'best seller.' This new novel ought to beat all records as a popular*

success. They will love it, our undiscriminating public, our unsophisticated souls who dwell in the outer suburbs."

Brandon read this review as he sucked an empty pipe. He, too, felt slightly sick—not because of the pipe. This was a knockout blow to any little self-conceit which sometimes buoyed him up. He was stricken, not because he was afraid of failure, but because as an artist he stood condemned by men who knew. He would never be able to write another line. These critics were killing him. He had never had much self-confidence. Now he had none, and without it no man can write a book or paint a picture or walk across the stage. He was like an actor who gets "the bird." There is no argument about it. The curtain goes down. The public objects to him. *La comedia e finita.*

Lydia Beaumont, that intellectual lady, scalped him before exposing his body to the soldier ants. He heard her through the loud-speaker in Foster's studio.

"Lydia will be nice to you, my lad," said Foster. "Cheer up and listen to the nice kind lady. She'll be on in three minutes."

"Honestly, I don't think I can bear it, old man," said Brandon. "I fear the worst."

Foster was astonished at his cowardice.

"What, a fireman and afraid of bumps? My dear good ass, what the deuce does it matter what these little critics say? You know you've written a fine novel. I've told you so, haven't I? I'm not a critic, thank God, but I know a novel when I read it. Now sit still and listen to a woman who loves you."

"She's going to give me hell," said Brandon. "She wiped the floor with me when I met her at the club."

"A little leg-pulling! I will say Lydia has a sense of humour. Courage, my little one. Pull your socks up. Thrust back that disordered lock of hair. Don't look as if you were going over the top with a German barrage waiting for you."

Lydia Beaumont's voice spoke into Foster's studio.

"And now I come to the new novel by the author of *The Way of Escape*, Mr. Francis Brandon. It is called *Success*. That is the title which must have jumped into the subconsciousness of a novelist who, unfortunately for himself, his art, and his public, became a best seller in two countries, as most of you know. These best sellers are difficult people to deal with from

the point of view of literary criticism. Is it fair to judge their work by high standards? Must one take them seriously as artists and interpreters? Is it any use pretending that they attempt to deal with the real problems of life or to draw their characters according to the laws of human psychology? A dramatic critic does not put musical comedy or the latest revue to this test of actuality. He is pleased, or pretends he is pleased, with the pretty legs of the dancing ladies. He laughs, or shrugs his shoulders at the humour of the leading comedian. A great deal of money has been spent on the production. A good many people depend on its financial success. He says a kind word for the show.

"In the same way a novel by a best seller is a financial rather than a literary affair. It has its own technique, its own medium. The author is not attempting to depict life. He is trying to entertain his innumerable readers. He is trying to increase his pile at Mudie's Library. He is not an artist. He does not pretend to be. He is repeating a formula which has succeeded before and may, he hopes, succeed again. That is perfectly legitimate. It belongs to the trade of bookmaking, which is honest and profitable. Mr. Brandon has repeated his formula as discovered in *The Way of Escape*. We have the same kind of characters, with a somewhat different environment. We have the same emotion to wring the hearts of novel-reading ladies with no intellectual pretensions who like a good cry—and why not? We have the same lack of style, lack of subtlety, lack of delicacy and intuition, but the same old story—and again, why not? I confess I could not go farther than the scene where a successful father, disillusioned by wealth and disappointed by success, learns of the death of his son upon whom all his last hopes are set. The boy has been killed in the war.

"I am a little tired of that easy appeal to cheap sentiment. Many boys were killed in the war. Many fathers grieved for them. Why churn up our most sacred memories by converting them into the sob-stuff of best-selling fiction? Mr. Brandon, as an artist, has been ruined by success. His novel of that name writes his own epitaph. But as a best seller he will no doubt have the reward for which he has renounced his art."

Val Foster switched off the wireless and spoke with a sudden explosive violence. "A thousand curses on that cat woman! May she marry a man who will scrag her on her wedding night!"

Brandon was very quiet. "It may be true," he said. "That's the worst of it."

PEARL had set her heart on that villa at Beaulieu. It was a very charming place, as Brandon agreed when she showed him some photographs from the agent. It was called Villa Graziosa, and stood out on a little promontory of its own, with stone terraces leading down to a strip of golden sand on the edge of the Mediterranean. There were gardens and pergolas under the blue sky of the Côte d'Azur, as shown in coloured reproductions which did not minimize the blueness of the sky nor the redness of the roses, nor the golden glory of the mimosa. The tennis court was sheltered on one side by a cliff wall, gleaming white.

"We could have a wonderful time here, darling," said Pearl. "And it's dirt cheap. Plenty of room for Father! I shall do a lot of sun bathing. I shall lie for hours with next to nothing on. I shall forget London fogs and the chatter of brainless girls and the dreary aspect of railings and bare trees as seen from St. Leonard's Terrace. You shall have a well earned rest from that eternal typewriter. I shan't let you take it away with you. I know some amusing people in Nice and Monte Carlo—to say nothing of Cannes and San Remo. We'll get up some tennis sets, and drink golden liquids out of little glasses to get cool again after good work at the net. Father will sneak off to Monte Carlo or Cannes to try out a new system. You and I will sit in the glamorous light of Mediterranean nights, talking now and then, but not too much, just drinking in beauty at every pore. You can make love to me as much as you like. It's what people do in villas like the Villa Graziosa! It was built for love, with just enough luxury to make it feel naughty. I daresay it was built by a Russian grand duke for some liquid-eyed lady. . . ."

Brandon listened with a smile about his lips and a worried look in his eyes. "It sounds splendid. But I'm afraid we can't afford it just yet."

"Pooh!" said Pearl. "That's nonsense."

Brandon was holding some uninteresting-looking papers in his hand. He had been studying them in his own room. Several times lately he had been in consultation with an arithmetical expert who did little sums on little slips of paper and pronounced judgment.

"Well, that's how it seems to work out. Income tax, so much. Super-tax, so much. Deductions for legitimate expenses—we might squeeze 'em a bit on that."

Brandon's literary agent had provided the raw material for these intricate calculations. Advance on *The Way of Escape*. Royalties from English sales. Royalties from American sales. Advance on *Success*. Sale of talkie rights.

Translation rights. Articles in English magazines. Articles in American magazines. Short stories. Second serial rights of earlier novels.

Brandon explained the situation to Pearl.

"This income tax is a bit of a knock. I had no idea it was going to hit me quite as hard as all that. To tell the honest truth, I didn't give a thought to it. At least, not enough thought to see that I ought to economize a bit."

"But we have economized!" said Pearl. "Who could live more simply than we do? A little house in Chelsea, one car, four servants, a few frocks to clothe one's nakedness, enough to eat and not too much, an occasional visit to the theatre. The simple life, Frank, as even you must admit!"

Brandon laughed quietly at this catalogue of expenses. Pearl's few frocks had cost a frightening sum to a man who in the old days had bought his suits off the peg. Those four servants seemed to have enormous appetites, to judge from the household bills. And Pearl had forgotten sundry loans to her father—that card-shuffling machine had not shown any profits yet—loans to her brother, who was not getting many briefs just now, and various contributions to his own impecunious relatives. She had forgotten how many times they dined out at restaurants, how many dinner parties they had given until she began to get tired of them. All these things had mounted up amazingly. Having no head for arithmetic, he had not realized the high figure of his expenditure until a few weeks ago, when he had looked at his passbook and made some inaccurate addition sums. Terrifying, even allowing for a margin of error. The interior decoration of a Queen Anne house seemed to cost as much as if it had been Buckingham Palace. Pearl's quest for antique furniture had resulted in some staggering bills. That William and Mary tallboy, that set of Hepplewhite chairs—Holy Moses!

Then there was the garage for the car, and new tires, and petrol, and decarbonizing, and a dozen other items. Wines—liqueurs—cigars—quite a tidy little sum. Flowers for evening parties. Wedding presents to some of Pearl's girl friends. Certain expenses connected with Willowbrook Cottage, including repairs to roof, gardener's wages, Mrs. Narracott's wages; new mouse traps—well, he could afford the mouse traps! Laundry bills at St. Leonard's Terrace. Household expenses generally. Window cleaning. The premium on a Queen Anne house before expenses of window cleaning. More than the advance he was getting on *Success*. Rates and taxes. God, how it all mounted up!

And now income tax and surtax. He had forgotten the surtax. Very foolish of him, of course, but previously he hadn't had to pay that kind of tribute.

It looked as if he would have to pay half the money he had earned on *The Way of Escape* and the advance royalties on Success. Unfortunately, by a carelessness regarding money affairs, due to the simple fact that until recently he had never earned much money, he had already spent more than three quarters of that amount. How was he going to pay the Inland Revenue authorities such a considerable amount of money which at the moment it was not in his power to obtain? *Success* had not been killed by the critics, but its sales had been seriously hurt by them. The libraries recorded a falling off in public demand. It was not realizing the promise of *The Way of Escape*.

"It's a most extraordinary thing," said Brandon, "but when I was poverty-stricken I never had a moment's anxiety about financial affairs. Now that I have been earning preposterous sums I find I can't make both ends meet. There must be something wrong somewhere. Have we been recklessly extravagant or something? Have I been behaving like a madman? We ought to have cut our coats according to our cloth, Pearl. We thought we had unlimited yards of cloth."

Pearl was perfectly cheerful about it. She refused to take it seriously. Frank had earned a good bit out of *The Way of Escape*. He was apt to exaggerate the vastness of it, not knowing much about money, poor dear—and there was no reason why he should not earn more, as long as he kept on writing.

"You must write a pot-boiler, darling," she told him. "Something more romantic. Get away from the lower middle-classes for once. I'm sure most novel-readers like to peep behind the scenes of Mayfair. Look at Michael Arlen. Above all, they like a happy ending. I know I do!"

She was tempting him to do the very things against which Lydia Beaumont had warned him, to sell his soul in the market place, to write deliberately for the mob, to abandon art for the best seller.

"I must write as I feel," he said gravely. "I must write my own kind of stuff, whether it sells or whether it doesn't."

"Idealist! Wouldn't you write something light to save your wife from squalor and starvation? Am I less important than your highbrow critics?"

"One can't prostitute one's pen," said Brandon, but he knew that he would write police-court news or any kind of muck if it were really a question of saving Pearl from unhappiness.

She laughed at his anxiety and rubbed the wrinkles out of his forehead with the tips of her fingers.

“Cheer up, Frank! We’re not in the bread line yet. Tell the income-tax robbers that they’ll jolly well have to wait. Your next book will put things all right. Meanwhile, I’ve set my heart on the Villa Graziosa. I propose we take it for three months from February. I shall have to let them know to-morrow. The agent says they have another offer.”

Brandon was distressed. He hated to disappoint Pearl. If she had set her heart upon a thing he would go hungry that she might have it. But he had a horror of getting into debt or living in advance of speculative earnings. If they took that villa it would mean dreadful anxiety, if not actual debt. Supposing he fell ill? Supposing he couldn’t write another novel? Supposing the next novel fell dead on the bookstalls as his early works had done? He would have to pay that income tax and surtax, which would eat up all his savings for the past year, after such heavy expenses.

“I’m afraid we can’t have that villa, Pearl,” he said gloomily. “Can’t you forget it? Next year, perhaps. Honestly, we can’t afford it.”

“But, my darling,” cried Pearl, “you’ve lost your sense of humour again. We can afford it perfectly. Why, you’re making more money than almost any other novelist. Every word you write is worth its weight in gold. If I were paid as much for the words that drop from my ruby lips——”

“I’m spending more than I’m earning,” said Brandon.

She reminded him that he had bought and furnished a house. That was not an annual expenditure, unless he decided to keep a mistress. He was extremely bad at arithmetic. He simply didn’t understand the value of money. It frightened him. She had often noticed that he became timid if he bought a few flowers or a five-and-ninepenny seat at a cinema. He wasn’t used to such wild extravagance! It seemed to him criminal.

“That darling villa will be good for your health, Frank. It will earn its own keep. It will help you to write your next novel. And it’s going at a bargain because of a slump in prices. Now let me write out a telegram, and you can walk round to the post office and send it off.”

“Pearl,” said Brandon rather gravely, “I don’t want you to take that villa. It wouldn’t be honest. We’ve spent beyond our means—for this year, anyhow. It’s a staggering blow—that income tax. . . . And I’m nervous about my work. The critics have knocked the stuffing out of me. I may never write another novel.”

“Rubbish!” laughed Pearl. “Pull your socks up, Frank! Kill that inferiority complex. And above all, send off that little telegram and ease my beating heart, which is quite set upon the Villa Graziosa.”

Brandon held one of her hands.

"I really can't. I really won't, my dear. You mustn't ask me to take on any fresh expense."

"But, Frank, I'm asking you to send off that telegram!"

For the first time since their marriage—for almost the first time—she looked at him impatiently, surprised that he should refuse her something she wanted very much, angrily, even, because he persisted in an argument which seemed to her quite foolish and unreasonable.

"My darling," he pleaded, "don't take that villa. I should be tortured with anxiety. Aren't you satisfied with this old house? Isn't it charming enough? Our little home!"

"I want a change," she told him, and her voice was cold and just a little hard.

"We could stay at Willowbrook Cottage," he argued. "Or with your grandmother. She has asked us down a dozen times."

"I want the sun," said Pearl. "I want to see a blue sky again. Frank, aren't you going to send off that telegram?"

"I'm afraid not. Don't ask me to, dearest."

"Very well."

That illustrated booklet, advertising the Villa Graziosa with its gardens and pergolas under a blue sky, dropped from her hand to the rug in front of the fireside. She did not stoop to pick it up, but went very quickly across the room, and Frank Brandon saw that his wife's lips were trembling and that her eyes were filled with tears.

He sprang up and followed her.

"Pearl! Darling! Don't you understand? Of course I would love you to go to the Riviera. It's only because I'm getting a bit anxious——"

She shook off his arm as he tried to embrace her.

"Don't! . . . You're always anxious! . . . It's absurd."

She went out of the room and left him there, feeling stricken. A few minutes later he crept up to their bedroom and found that she had locked the door. When he called out to her softly, she did not answer, and Kemp came down the passage in his sinister, stealthy way.

"Are you dressing to-night, sir?"

Of course he had heard Brandon calling to his wife through the locked door. Probably when he got down to the kitchen he would wink at the

parlourmaid and say, “A bit of a tiff upstairs. The mistress has locked the governor out of her room. It always begins that way.”

That was what Brandon imagined, because he was a novelist and often overheard imaginary conversations like that. He went downstairs and sat in the drawing room until Kemp came and turned up the lights. Then he went up to his study and locked his own door. Now there were two locked doors in this house in St. Leonard’s Terrace.

47

Mr. Jerningham spoke to Brandon about the income tax after a private talk with Pearl.

“It’s nothing less than robbery, my dear fellow. Let me have a look at those infernal papers with their illiterate English and preposterous jargon. Not that I want to pry, but I might advise you how to get a bit off.”

Brandon handed over his papers. He did not mind his father-in-law knowing how much he earned and how much he had to pay. It was better for him to know the exact figures than to imagine that Brandon was earning as much as most people believed to be the inexhaustible wealth of a best seller.

Mr. Jerningham put on his pince-nez and went through the figures, while Brandon watched him. He raised his eyebrows, smiled sardonically, laughed harshly, groaned, with a variety of expression which astonished Brandon and amused him. Finally he pitched the papers away from him as though he could not bear to look at them any longer.

“Iniquitous!” he cried. “Highway robbery. Bolshevism and blackmail. Oh, God, that England should come to this, should suffer this, should lie down under this. Where is our ancient spirit? Where is liberty? Where are the rights of private property? The thing, my dear Frank, is a brutal outrage.”

Brandon’s sense of humour, not perhaps strong on the surface, not generally acknowledged by his friends, came up from the depths of gloom and twisted his lips into a faint smile.

“It isn’t pleasant, but other people have to face it. Somebody has to pay the war debts and an annual budget of eight hundred million pounds. I don’t want to shirk my fair share.”

Mr. Jerningham was as angry as though it were his own money that was being demanded.

"My dear fellow, for heaven's sake don't talk such nonsense. Blasphemous nonsense, if you will forgive my saying so. This kind of thing makes my blood boil. It makes me feel murderous. I want to go out and kill a government official or a politician."

Brandon endeavoured to calm him down.

"One must be reasonable, sir. The only person I blame is myself. I ought to have foreseen the amount I should have to pay. I was a fool to spend the money in advance."

Mr. Jerningham took one of Brandon's cigars. They were good cigars, specially provided for him by a thoughtful son-in-law.

"I am not an unreasonable man," he said. "If I speak with some heat now and then it is because I am intolerant of injustice and blackmail. I refuse to look the other way when I find the hand of a pickpocket reaching for my wallet. I would even pardon a poor devil who wants to steal my money to buy himself a meal and a night's lodging, but I refuse to find extenuating circumstances for a gang of politicians who rob hard-working people of their legitimate earnings in order to support a system of social demoralization by which they have bribed their way to power. What do I find in those infernal papers, Frank? A demand for half the money you have made by your genius—your one book, which may be the fine flower of your life.

"All your thoughts, all your agonies of heart and mind, all your inspiration, went into that book—which I confess I have not yet read. It is not a business. It is not a trade. It is not the routine work of a factory. There is no guarantee that you may write another book of the same quality or with the same success. It is not a regular income. It is your capital. But the government treats it as one year's income and demands not only a pound of flesh but half your living body and soul. Shameful! You must refuse to pay. If necessary you must go to prison rather than pay. This country will never be saved until thousands of people are willing to go to prison rather than pay this tribute to a blackmailing government which is taking the wealth of the hard-working classes to pamper the idle and the inefficient and those who want everything for nothing. Education must be paid for. By whom? By the fathers of the children who go to school? Certainly not. Not a penny of income tax for *them*. By you, my dear Frank! By me! By my father's death duties. Who pays for all this so-called social service which is weakening our national fibre? Those who receive its benefits? Those who vote for more public expenditure? Certainly not! It is paid by the sweat of mind, the agony of soul of men who burn the midnight oil, like you, my dear fellow. The

creators of the nation's wealth are being taxed to death to maintain a system of State-endowed laziness. Unless England revolts against this iniquity, England will perish and will deserve to perish."

Brandon listened with a faint smile about his lips. It was amusing that his father-in-law should be so fierce on the subject of this income tax while he himself, as the victim, felt no burning sense of injustice. He was asked to pay a lot of income tax because he had earned a lot of income—far too much out of one novel. Perhaps there was something in Mr. Jerningham's argument that the lower orders, as he called them, should contribute a bit to income tax and pay a few pence a week for their children's schooling. It would give them a sense of responsibility for national expenditure. But he was all for a better redistribution of wealth which had happened since the war, and he aroused his father-in-law's wrath by saying so.

"Redistribution of wealth? My dear lad, that's what the burglar is after when he pinches a lady's pearls off her dressing table. Do you stand for the ethics of the thieves' kitchen?"

"I believe in more equality of reward for service. There are too many people in this country who accumulate millions while others starve."

Mr. Jerningham raised his hands with a look of consternation.

"After all our discussions, you still put up these sentimental falsities? Nobody is starving in England to-day. Nobody is allowed to starve. They are generously nourished at the nation's expense. We are spending one hundred million pounds a year on poor relief. Utterly unproductive. In many cases it is better not to work than to work. By taxing industry and wealth we are creating more unemployment, because capital is no longer available for the development of trade. The old landowners can no longer carry on their agriculture. They turn away their labourers, their gardeners, their grooms. The gentry have to sell their old mansions and sneak into little houses in side streets where they polish up the door knockers and pretend to look smart with one maidservant. Is that good for the country? Doesn't it increase the number of people clamouring for doles?"

"It's the inevitable penalty of transition," said Brandon stubbornly. "Meanwhile the slums have lost their old stench. The people have been lifted up. They wear decent clothes. They have more happiness. I'm all on their side. I should be a cad if I squealed because I have to pay tribute on a high income."

Mr. Jerningham looked at him with a kind of exasperation.

"It's people like you, Frank, who are dragging down dear old England to a second-rate power, and perhaps even to inevitable ruin. You are like the intellectual aristocrats who played with the revolutionary ideas in the eighteenth century because they believed in the slush of Rousseau's Social Contract. Result: the September massacres and the guillotine. I am not a man who has any love for the big financial crooks who juggle with high finance and make millions by dishonest deals. Most of them dodge the income tax. Some of them commit suicide, like poor Chantry, when the game goes against them. I leave them out of my argument. But I resent the murder of the English aristocracy, the bleeding of the solid old middle-class, the blackmail of the old landowning class. I believe in the rights of private property. I will not surrender to the immorality of the Socialist creed nor bow the knee to Bolshevism. As an aristocrat, I defy the clamour of a thieving proletariat."

He stood up with his hand to his hip as though it rested on a sword hilt. He raised his head proudly and defiantly as though standing on a tumbril on his way to the guillotine, scornful of a howling mob.

"I believe in the decent welfare of the little people," said Brandon.

They exchanged heated words. The conversation became farcical. Here was Brandon, with those income-tax papers on the floor at his feet, defending the tax collectors who were demanding half his earnings on his one successful novel. Here was Mr. Jerningham, who had been living in Brandon's house, smoking his cigars, drinking his wine, ordering clothes at Brandon's expense, and accusing his son-in-law of being a Bolshevik and on the side of the robbers.

"There is only one thing to do," said Mr. Jerningham, when the heated atmosphere had cleared a little. "Shake the dust of England off your feet, my lad. It is no place for a self-respecting man. Take that villa at Beaulieu. Tell the Inland Revenue to go to hell. Explain to them that you can no longer afford to live in a country which robs men of their just reward. Like other literary gentlemen, you will live on the Riviera and read the Paris *Daily Mail* for news of a blighted and bankrupt nation which was once your own."

"No," said Brandon. "I'm damned if I do. I refuse to be exiled. I would rather be poor in England than rich in any other place."

"Consider," said Mr. Jerningham. "There is a blue sky at Beaulieu. There is golden sunshine shining on the rocks. For half the sum you pay for this little old house in the fog you can buy a white palace with rose gardens and pergolas. Pearl has set her heart on it, Frank. Why not please your wife and save your money?"

"It is too near Monte Carlo," said Brandon bitterly.

Mr. Jerningham raised his eyebrows and one of his delicate hands.

"Unfair, old boy. Below the belt, for once. I've never borrowed from you to pay my gambling debts."

That was true. But because he had lost on his famous system he had come to live in Brandon's house.

"I put it to you, Frank. Pearl is craving for a change from this wet, damp climate. She is a sun worshipper like myself. She is a restless little lady, like most of the Jerningham women. For your own happiness and for hers, I recommend that villa at Beaulieu. We could have a very good time there. I could get back my form at golf. I could put you up at the Sporting Club. I could bring along some amusing people whom you would like to know. You could get a new background for your novels, a new atmosphere. You could make a long nose at the income tax on future profits."

"I would rather live in Willowbrook Cottage," said Brandon miserably.

But he sent off that telegram to the Villa Graziosa. Pearl had set her heart on it.

48

The Villa Graziosa at Beaulieu was almost as good as its photographs suggested. It had a terraced garden with pergolas upon which rambling roses climbed. Bushes of mimosa gleamed with a wealth of gold. A red tennis court was sheltered by the white wall of a chalk cliff. After three days of rain with a wind that cut like a knife, and a gray sky over a gray sea—"What about this Côte d'Azur?" asked Brandon gloomily—the sun came out in a blazing glory, the sky was deeply blue, the sea was an emerald lake, the snow-covered peaks of the Alpes Maritimes glistened as though strewn with powdered diamonds, beautiful shadows were flung across their rocks, the stone walls of the white villa were splashed with the wine-coloured purple of bougainvillea, and there were oranges and lemons ripening between groves of olives.

Not far from the Villa Graziosa was the enormous palace of the Bristol Hotel, dazzling white in its parklike garden, and looking like an enchanted castle at night in the velvet darkness, with all its windows lighted. And when this darkness fell, and the chill which always came just before twilight was

followed by the warm and languorous breath of a Riviera night, the coastline was outlined by thousands of twinkling lamps and innumerable windows in villas up the mountain sides shone out like stars. There was a white radiance above Monaco and Monte Carlo. The hilltop villages of Eze and Roquebrune were darkly etched with points of light. Along the Grande Corniche—that high winding way along the mountain side—cars passed like fireflies. On the lower road, between Villefranche and Monte Carlo, their lamps swept like searchlights through the tunnels and along the face of the cliffs. Not even advertisement can vulgarize this beauty.

The villa had colour-washed walls and polished floors. Some man of taste had furnished it, not overcrowding its rooms, except Pearl's bedroom, where there was a touch of tawdriness. So it seemed to Brandon when he looked at the bed with rose-coloured hangings, and the dressing table tied up in pink bows, and the shaded lamps carried by gilt cupids, and the gilded mirrors and the Persian rugs.

"The nest of a love bird!" cried Pearl, laughing, when she saw it first. "I don't think she was a respectable married woman, the little lady who slept here first."

"It reeks with stale scent," said Brandon, sniffing disapprovingly.

"*Toutes les Fleurs!* Rather pleasant. They spray you with it at Grasse. You and I must go there, Frank."

Mr. Jerningham had a bedroom looking out over the Mediterranean. It was barely furnished, but he had brought a trunkload of clothes and a dressing case elaborately provided with gold-topped bottles and ivory-backed brushes—a relic of his youthful dandyism.

"This does me as an old campaigner," he remarked. "I can put up with the Simple Life, especially when it's next door to Monte Carlo."

"Now, Father!" said Pearl warningly, "don't you go off the deep end. You know what happened last year!"

Mr. Jerningham laughed good-naturedly.

"Lord, yes! I came a bit of a whopper. My system broke down hopelessly. I'll just crawl round the tables now and then and watch other fools lose their money. A mug's game! . . . but very amusing now and then."

He turned to Brandon with his charming smile.

"I'll put you up at the Sporting Club, Frank. It's worth your while to drop in now and then. Good copy for a novel. Strange types, my dear fellow! If you feel like trying your luck with a few pounds, you can just get the thrill of it as a new experience."

"It's not my game," answered Brandon firmly. "I should hate to fling away a few pounds. They mean too many words which are difficult to write. Besides . . ."

He did not say that "besides," but Pearl interpreted his thoughts:

"Besides, with all the unemployed and the down-and-outs, it's a wicked shame, Father!"

She squeezed her husband's arm and leaned her head against his shoulder. She was very sweet to him because he had yielded about the Villa Graziosa.

"The man with the conscience," she said teasingly.

Brandon allowed his conscience—perhaps it was just an inferiority complex—to be lulled by his surroundings. The climate is not of a kind in which the conscience becomes active. It is exceedingly relaxing to body and mind. Even Pearl did not play much tennis on that red court below the white cliff, although several of her father's friends showed up in white flannels with rackets to match and played a few leisurely games before they retired to a shady corner to cool down over cocktails provided by Kemp. Pearl had insisted upon bringing Kemp!

They were delighted to see Mr. Jerningham and his daughter on the Côte d'Azur again. Most of them called Pearl by her Christian name and kissed her cheek, to the annoyance of Brandon again. They were retired colonels and majors living in permanent exile from England because of reduced circumstances. Pearl had once described them to Brandon in his country cottage.

"In the morning they read the Paris edition of the *Daily Mail* and curse the Labour Party. In the afternoon they play golf and curse the caddies. At half-past four they amble into the Scottish tea rooms at Nice, Cannes, or Mentone, and make a loud hawing at the back of their throats, and curse the climate over toasted buns."

The hospitality of the Villa Graziosa enabled them to vary their day's programme. Their tennis was not successful. "Too strenuous!" as they remarked, sinking into deck chairs after putting a few balls over the net. They were getting a bit stiff at the knees. "Anno Domini, old boy!" But they found it very pleasant to talk over old times with Jerningham.

Brandon listened to this talk while his eyes smiled at Pearl, sitting in her bathing dress with an exotic-looking wrap, sun-basking so that at the end of a week her arms and legs were bronzed. He didn't quite like this public exposure of her beauty, especially as one of these elderly exiles—Major

Vernon Brabazon-Vernon—chaffed her about it with affected gallantry after fixing his monocle.

"Exquisite lady! Lovely legs! By Gad, Pearl, you make me believe in fairies."

They asked about old friends. Dear old Charlie Best. Sold his house in Hertfordshire? Those infernal death duties, of course. . . . Freddie Haversham? Died of pneumonia? Oh, poor old Freddie! One of the best. A very fine cavalry officer. . . . Cynthia Cholmondeley? A grandmother. By Jove—incredible! It seems only the other day that she was flirting with every good-looking subaltern in Simla.

Presently, and inevitably, they discussed the conditions in England. No hope for the old country while Socialism was rampant. Those Labour fellows were dragging it down to ruin. The old landed gentry had been taxed out of existence. We should lose India and Egypt, as sure as fate. The Dominions were breaking away. England would become like Holland or Belgium—a little bourgeois state. Hellish!

And then, Riviera gossip, scandal, arrivals and departures, new members of the British colony, the old habitués. That old woman Countess Bernitzi had lost all her money at the tables and was found lying dead of starvation in a *pension* at Monaco. Two little hussies from the Ziegfeld Follies had broken the bank last month. A phenomenal run of luck! A French vicomte had shot himself in the gardens after a bad break. No fuss made, of course. The usual hushing up. Violet Lovelace had had her face lifted, poor old soul! She looked twenty years younger—not a day older than forty-five. Very unnatural.

"Good heavens, I thought she was dead years ago!" exclaimed Mr. Jerningham.

Major Vernon Brabazon-Vernon laughed so much that his monocle dropped from his eye. He pulled out a little notebook in which he jotted something down.

"I'm keeping a list," he explained. "It's called the Book of the Living Dead. Whenever anybody says, 'Good heavens, I thought he—or she—was dead years ago!' I add another name to my list. You'd be surprised how many I get in the Sporting Club."

Brandon was bored with this sort of talk. He was surprised that Pearl found it amusing. He felt sorry for these middle-aged exiles, cut off from their old roots, living "on the cheap," as Pearl had often told him, in second-class *pensions* or gimcrack villas.

"Poor old dears," said Pearl. "I'm rather fond of them. I've known them since I was a flapper before the war. I used to flirt with them when they were ten years younger. Major Vernon asked me to marry him. Once or twice I thought I would, when I was fed up with foreign governesses."

"Horrible thought!" said Brandon jealously.

Pearl tucked her hand through his arm and strolled with him through the terraced garden. They sat together on the strip of sand, hot beneath them in the midday sun. Pearl slipped off her wrap and lay at full length, with her head in Brandon's lap, and he thrilled to her beauty again.

"Isn't this wonderful!" she said with her eyes shut and her face to the sun. "February! Think of the fogs in St. Leonard's Terrace. Glory be to the sun!"

"I must be doing some work," said Brandon. "It's time I started a new novel. I'm getting anxious."

"Anxious about what, darling?"

"About work—and money. I wrote that check for the income tax. Frightening! I must get busy again to make both ends meet. There's precious little in the bank, Pearl."

"How you do worry!" she laughed. "Father never worries about things like that. He never has worried. I've never worried. Why worry?"

She spoke with a kind of drowsiness in her voice. Before he had made up his mind to answer that question of "Why worry?" she was asleep with a smile about her lips.

Brandon sat there with her head in his lap, thinking out a new novel. He had a theme for a plot. He had even started the first chapter. He had made up his mind that he would have to steal away from Pearl and do some serious work. He would have to resist the spell of this sunshine and get down to his typewriter, which he had brought after all, though Pearl had asked him to leave it behind. He would have to exercise more self-control and concentrate on the new novel. Otherwise they would all be in the cart. Pearl and Mr. Jerningham and the house in St. Leonard's Terrace, and various relations, and the servants, and that pallid blighter Kemp, all depended for their comfort on the working of his brain. *Success* had been a definite failure in spite of its name. Pearl said, "Why worry?" but he had to worry. And the worst of it was that worry came between his thoughts and his typewriter. Or perhaps it was the climate—so enervating, so relaxing, so languorous.

Several times he took his typewriter into the garden after breakfast, when Pearl was still in bed, after a late night at the Sporting Club or a gala

evening at the Bristol, where she had met some of the younger crowd, and danced to a jazz band, and thrown streamers round the necks of unknown men, and fought battles of confetti with other girls. It was very difficult to concentrate. His head ached a bit. His eyes were dazzled by the sunlight. Those snow-covered peaks looked marvellous under a blue sky. Some peasants were singing as they trudged down a mule track. There was a white yacht creeping round the point with its brasswork shining. . . . Chapter II. A scene in an employment agency in the King's Road, Chelsea. Domestic servants wanted. Governesses. A girl wants a job for the sake of a baby who has arrived in an unfriendly world. Has never been in service before. Knows French. Quite willing to be a parlourmaid in a nice family. Or perhaps a nursery governess. Anything. But nothing doing at the moment. Previous experience necessary. . . .

What muck! And all the critics would be waiting to tear him to pieces, to drag him down by ridicule, to accuse him of false sentiment and bad art, and commercialized fiction. Lydia Beaumont would have something to say again about "best sellers," suggesting that he was a cheap-Jack in the market place. And she would be right. He would have to stand in the market place. If he didn't make a success this time, he couldn't make both ends meet. Pearl would have to go without frocks. She would have to be shabby-genteel again. They would have to do things "on the cheap." . . .

That girl in the employment agency. The hard-faced lady with pince-nez, who knows her type and guesses her trouble. . . .

"How's it going, dear lad? Lovely morning. Glorious sunshine."

Mr. Jerningham appears, in white flannels, with white shoes. Impossible to work. Damn that glorious sunshine! How can anyone work when the sun is hot on a February morning? Far better the fog in St. Leonard's Terrace, in a quiet room with a gas fire.

"Hullo, Frank! Working? Come and have a bathe."

It is Pearl, ready for the sea, in a silk wrap with scarlet butterflies, and bare feet in red slippers. She stretches out her arms to the sun.

"Glory be to the sun!" she cries.

It is quite impossible to work.

Brandon decided that he would work after dinner. From nine o'clock till midnight. Perhaps now and then until two o'clock in the morning, if he felt in the mood for it. But Pearl liked sitting on the veranda after dinner, watching the twinkling lights on the coastline. She liked to have his arms about her. She liked to lean her head against him.

"Don't go tapping that old typewriter, Frank! I'm sure you've done enough work to-day. This is one of our good hours. Don't spoil it. Wait till we get back to dirty old London."

Or Pearl became restless for amusement.

"Let's put in an hour at the Sporting Club. Don't you like watching all the strange types?"

No, Brandon didn't like watching them, those painted old harridans with scraggy hands grabbing their winnings—or other people's winnings; those hard-mouthed, cod-eyed men, utterly expressionless, who staked heavily and lost or won without a glimmer behind their masks; those anxious, restless women who couldn't hide their fear when the numbers ran against them and the croupiers raked in their chips; those old habitués who whispered to each other in corners and lied unceasingly about their gains and losses. The rooms were stifling, and the atmosphere was heavy with scent and the reek of cigars.

Brandon watched all these faces passing. There was hardly one of them which did not look neurotic, unhealthy, sinister, or vicious. Perhaps that was too sweeping. Here and there were young women whose eyes sparkled brighter than their jewels, and a few men of soldierly or naval type, gray-eyed and tanned. It was easy to see that they were not regular visitors. They had not been devitalized or dehumanized.

One evening a tall, thin man with golden hair fading and thinning, and blue eyes blinking behind his glasses, stared at Brandon once or twice and then spoke to him.

"Aren't you Francis Brandon? Haven't I seen you at the Pen and Palette Club?"

It was Walter Diamond, author of innumerable detective tales.

"So you've become a best seller," he said when he had established identity. "I suppose you're going to join the gay throng of tax dodgers. We novelists are all doing it—and why not?"

"I prefer to live in England," said Brandon.

Walter Diamond blinked his pale-blue eyes again and made a gesture of incredulity with a long thin hand.

"*Pas possible!* No one can live in England. One can starve to death in England. One can commit suicide in England—but one cannot live in England. Not with the income tax at four-and-sixpence in the pound, and the surtax rising steeply so that one has to work half the year, not for oneself, not for one's family, not for one's nation, but for the Chancellor of the

Exchequer and his band of brigands. I decided that I would live in a sunny clime, put by a bit for my old age when the poor old bean begins to get tired, and visit England now and then to see the changes in Piccadilly. You must come out to my villa one day. It's rather delicious, and I have a very good cook. . . . Who is that charming-looking lady—like a portrait of Lady Hamilton by Romney?"

"My wife," said Brandon.

He introduced the man, and Pearl was delighted to meet him, having read some of his novels. Brandon knew in his heart that she preferred them to *The Way of Escape* and *Success* and other tales told on his typewriter.

"I think I must have a little flutter, Frank," she said later in the evening. "Give me five pounds. Just to try my luck."

He hated to part with five pounds. In spite of the climate, his conscience pricked him, just as she had said it would. Five pounds would keep a slum family for two weeks in Walworth. But he watched Pearl play and became slightly less worried in his conscience—that absurd conscience!—when she began to win. Other people watched her because of the colour in her cheeks and her shining eyes, and her ripples of laughter when she backed the right numbers. The croupiers smiled at her and seemed glad that she won. They smiled again when they raked away her winnings.

"Change another five pounds, Frank. I'm enjoying myself to-night. It's worth it, and I'm going to be lucky."

Brandon tried to persuade her to leave the table, but she wouldn't hear of it.

"Just for once, Frank! It will all come back. You watch me."

She had another run of luck—quite a pile of chips. She would have been well in hand if she had left when Brandon whispered to her again.

"Don't you think you'd better leave it now?"

"Oh, one must be sporting. Follow your luck. That's the game."

Luck let her down in the last half hour. Brandon had parted with twenty pounds when at last he took her back to the Villa Graziosa.

"An expensive evening," he remarked quietly as they drove back in a hired car.

"Great fun, don't you think?" she answered. "You must admit I had a run for my money."

"Yes, but the money ran faster," said Brandon gloomily. "Twenty of the best, Pearl. Enough for a new frock. Five weeks' wages to Kemp. Half the

price of a short story in an English magazine."

"Yes, but one doesn't live by bread alone," said Pearl. "I must get a thrill now and again. It's in my blood. The reckless Jerninghams! We mustn't be bored. We decline to be bored. It's that naughty great-aunt of mine. I can feel her tingling sometimes. She tempts me to do the things I didn't ought to do, as they say in the Prayer Book, and to leave undone the things I most dislike to do. By the by, what's happened to Father?"

Brandon had seen Mr. Jerningham in the baccarat room, very much engaged, and Pearl became anxious.

"I'm afraid Father is asking for trouble again," she remarked thoughtfully. "There's the light of adventure in his eyes. . . . One can lose an awful lot of money at baccarat."

Mr. Jerningham lost what he called a trivial sum. Sixteen pounds that night. He won it back the next evening and had a bit over, with which he bought Pearl a pretty trinket in a shop at Monaco. It was very sweet of him, she thought.

Brandon generally knew when he had won. He walked more jauntily through the gardens of the Bristol Hotel, where they went to tea sometimes. He talked more eloquently about the law of probabilities and the mystery of Chance. He insisted upon paying for cocktails and coffees. He was pleased to have a little money to burn. When he lost he became silent and thoughtful and waved his hand towards Brandon when the waiter appeared with the bill.

"My turn to-morrow, dear lad."

He was uncommonly thoughtful for several days towards the end of the first month in the Villa Graziosa. Brandon feared the worst and spoke to Pearl about it.

"I'm afraid your father has been losing heavily. He can't keep away from those infernal rooms, and he looks as though his luck had run out."

Pearl reassured him.

"He's only playing for small stakes. Just a pound or two down, he tells me. That won't ruin him. And he gets a lot of enjoyment out of it. The little thrill that tickles up the Jerningham blood!"

It was a few evenings later when Brandon knew that his father-in-law had underestimated his losses in talking to Pearl.

Brandon was working after Pearl had gone to bed. Mr. Jerningham had taken the Bristol bus to Monte Carlo after dinner. He had promised to be

back before midnight, but Brandon looked up from his typewriter after finishing his third chapter and was startled to see that the little travelling clock on the sideboard pointed to twenty minutes past three, and Mr. Jerningham was not home yet.

"That infernal gambling!" thought Brandon. "It's a disease."

He stepped out to the veranda, from which he could see the coastline. Some of the lights had gone out, but there was still the white radiance over Monaco. A warm breath laden with the sharp herblike smell of mimosa came from the garden. The sea was touched with silver by a crescent moon. The silence of this Riviera night was profound and magical until it was cut by the shriek of a klaxon horn. That would be the Bristol bus, bringing home the gamblers, some of them excited by winning a bit, most of them poorer than they had gone forth. A mug's game! That Sporting Club was worse than an opium den. When once the poison had infected people's minds they couldn't resist it. They worshipped the goddess of Luck, who smiled at them with snake-like eyes and teased them on to spill their money at her feet. There was something devilish about it. Decent women pawned their jewels and furs to make one more throw. They uttered incantations to get on the right side of Luck. They indulged in absurd superstitions and believed in some magic of numbers.

"I can't see the sense of it," thought Brandon. "The odds are always against them. They're bound to lose in the long run."

He heard footsteps crunching on the gravel of the garden path and saw the tall, lean figure of Mr. Jerningham.

"Hullo!" said Brandon. "It's devilish late."

Mr. Jerningham raised his hand.

"Not in bed yet, dear lad? Any chance of a small whisky? Those rooms became as hot as hell."

He came in through the veranda and threw his silk-lined coat over one of the chairs. Brandon poured him out a whisky and thought he looked fagged and a trifle dejected.

"Any luck?" he asked.

Mr. Jerningham evaded the question for a moment and whistled softly, while he took the last cigarette out of his case and felt for a match in his white waistcoat.

"Frank," he said presently, "I have had a bit of a bump. It's no use disguising the fact, old boy, that I have lost quite a packet. Luck flouted me —the bitch—and wouldn't be wooed back again. A thousand curses upon

her false allurement. Well, it's a mug's game! I always said so. I've made a silly fool of myself again."

He laughed good-naturedly after making this confession of folly and helped himself to a drop more whisky.

"How much have you lost?" asked Brandon gravely.

Mr. Jerningham shrugged his shoulders.

"I always forget my losses. I only remember what I win. It's the golden rule of gambling. It's the way to play the game of life. Never grouse over your losses. Cut them and forget them. Meet to-morrow with head high and a heart full of hope. Give me a cigarette, Frank."

Brandon was glad to give him a cigarette. He was not so glad to write him a check for two hundred and fifty pounds, which he needed rather urgently to put things right with his bank. He was temporarily overdrawn.

"I can't afford it, sir," said Brandon sternly. "I'm very sorry, but it's out of the question. I'm spending beyond my means. I shall be in the cart if things go on like this."

His voice rose with sudden harshness.

"I wish to God we had never come to this place. I can't write. I'm not earning any money, and we're piling up the expenses. Pearl doesn't understand that I'm not a rich man. Everybody thinks I'm rolling in money because I wrote a successful novel. Why—damn it!—I had more peace of mind when I was earning three hundred a year in a country cottage. It's intolerable. It knocks my nerves to pieces. I can't write a decent line because I'm so desperately anxious about the financial side of things. That income tax skinned me alive. You know that perfectly well. Haven't you any sense of honour? I thought you were an aristocrat and a gentleman. I don't profess to be an aristocrat, but I've never borrowed a bean from anybody, and I've never lived at other people's expense."

Mr. Jerningham was surprised and hurt but not angry.

"Nerves, old boy! Nerves!" he said. "The curse of modern civilization. You've been working too late. I see you've been drinking coffee to jerk up that imaginative brain of yours. Dangerous! I don't believe in burning the midnight oil over a brew of coffee."

He put his hand on Brandon's shoulder.

"Don't worry about that check. Forget it! I daresay the bank will give me a little rope, and, if not, I shall have to persuade my poor old mother to let me sell some of her pictures. It will break her heart, but, after all, one has to

think of the honour of the family. I can't afford to be disgraced—for Pearl's sake. When we get back to town I shall get the secretaryship of a golf club and leave my little room in St. Leonard's Terrace. You needn't say anything about this to Pearl. We needn't worry the poor darling. If the worst comes to the worst and that golf club falls through, I can address envelopes and earn an honest penny. Meanwhile, dear lad, don't worry. Write your works of genius with an easy mind. Don't drink coffee late at night."

He was noble in his forgiveness of Brandon's nerve storm. He was generous, kind, and charming. Brandon was so ashamed of himself that he wrote the check for two hundred and fifty pounds before he went to bed and tapped at Mr. Jerningham's door to hand it to him.

"What's this?" asked Mr. Jerningham, who was in his shirt and trousers with his braces hanging down.

"The check," said Brandon. "I want to apologize for saying caddish things. Nerves, as you remarked."

"Oh, the check! Much obliged, my dear boy. You needn't tell Pearl about it. Take an aspirin, won't you? It's very soothing to jangled nerves. Well, good-night, Frank. God bless you. Kiss Pearl for me."

Brandon slunk to bed, humiliated, self-reproachful, anxious. Pearl was sleeping with a smile about her lips, as he saw when he lit a candle and bent over her.

49

It was unfortunate that the Villa Graziosa had to be abandoned before the end of the second month, and that Pearl had to leave the sunshine of the Côte d'Azur for the gray and leaden sky of an English March. Mr. Jerningham's mother had had a stroke, and the doctor feared the worst.

"We shall have to go back, my dear," said Mr. Jerningham. "It's very sad to part from this little paradise, but we can't leave the old lady to peg out all alone. Besides, there'll be things to settle up and so forth."

Pearl agreed. She loved her old granny.

"Let's fly back," she suggested. "It will save time."

Brandon demurred because of the risk.

"What risk?" asked Pearl. "It's perfectly safe. Much safer than French railway trains."

They compromised by flying from Paris, and Mr. Jerningham and Pearl went straight from Croydon to Harley Green while Brandon returned to a lonely house in St. Leonard's Terrace. Kemp and the maids arrived a few hours later, having travelled by train and boat.

Old Mrs. Jerningham took an unconscionable time a-dying, and it was this delay of death to her stricken old body which was the cause of Brandon's setting out on a lonely adventure, without Pearl. It was hateful to him, but he steeled himself to the sacrifice because it might relieve him of those financial anxieties which had come to him since his success. That lecture agent in the United States had cabled him again, repeating his offer, urging him to accept, and holding out rosy prospects of "big money." American audiences were still eager to see and hear the author of *The Way of Escape*, which they had not yet forgotten. *Splendid reception assured*, cabled the agent. *Hospitality offered in many towns. Suggest thirty lectures on the younger novelists minimum fee seven hundred and fifty dollars. Expenses guaranteed.*

Brandon had said that he would rather be boiled in oil than do such a thing. That was before the critics had torn the flesh off his bones, and before the tax collectors had demanded and received half the proceeds of his "best seller." Boiling oil would have to be endured—for Pearl's sake. Perhaps it wouldn't be quite at boiling point, and perhaps he could harden his skin to the torture of it—for Pearl's sake. He might even persuade her to come with him.

"What do you think, Pearl? Could you leave your grandmother? You could have a great time in the States. America would fall in love with you, and I should be jealous from New York to San Francisco."

Pearl's eyes shone like stars at the thought. It would be a wonderful adventure, and a great change from St. Leonard's Terrace. She had always wanted to see New York and its skyscrapers. She would like America to fall in love with her from New York to San Francisco. She would laugh at a husband's jealousy.

"Perhaps poor old granny will die before you start, Frank. That would be a great blessing. Then I could come with you. I can't leave the dear old thing until she's properly dead. She has been wonderfully good to me all my life. I should feel a beast if I went gadding off while she hovers on the edge of the grave. Yesterday she held my hand and asked me not to leave her. It's nice to

see a pretty face, she told me. She likes me because I laugh and look bright instead of pulling a long face."

Brandon hoped, heartlessly, that the old lady would die before the date fixed for his passage on the *Baltic*. But she rallied for a week or two, and the doctor said she might last another month. As the day of his sailing came nearer Brandon cursed himself for having agreed to go. The thought of being without Pearl for three months was overwhelming and filled him with cowardice.

"I shall cable saying I'm ill," he told her. "I can't go through it. I can't leave you, my dear."

Pearl quoted some old lines to him.

> " 'I could not love thee, dear, so much,
> Loved I not honour more.' "

"You can't let them down, Frank. That's absurd. They've hired the halls. They've printed the bills telling the world what a famous man you are. You'll have to face the music now. A stiff upper lip, Frank. After all, it's only three months. You'll be back again with wads of dollars before we've had time to miss each other."

"I don't believe you will miss me," said Brandon miserably. "I believe you rather like the idea of getting rid of me."

She put her fingers through his hair and disordered it.

"You'll love me all the more after a slight respite."

"Three months!" groaned Brandon. "Ghastly and horrible thought."

"Not too good," said Pearl. "I shall be bored to death without you, Frank."

"Some good-looking ass will make love to you," said Brandon jealously. "I shall think of you dancing with amorous men while I lecture to women's clubs in Detroit and Philadelphia."

"You have no faith in your wife's loyalty, then? Frank, I'm ashamed of you. Of course, if I get very bored, I may encourage some nice man to take me out to dinner now and then. I must amuse myself somehow while you wallow on American adulation."

She teased him until he was utterly wretched. There were even tears in his eyes on the night before he sailed.

"Pearl!" he said, "I can't go on that lecture tour. I can't leave you for three months. I feel like death. Honestly, I'm ill. I couldn't stagger onto a

platform. Let me send a wireless cancelling the whole damn thing."

"Kiss me, Frank. Hold me tight in your arms. Be brave. You'll have a wonderful time. I promise to be good while you're away. The faithful Penelope!"

She came with him to the boat train and was not shy on the platform when he put his arms about her.

"Pearl! My dearest wife. It tears my heart."

Val Foster was there and gripped his hand.

"Wish I were coming with you. Tell America that you know a portrait painter who specializes in ancestors. Family portraits provided by mail order. Ancestors supplied to meet all requirements. Eighteenth-century ladies. Gentlemen of the Stuart period. No two faces alike."

"Take care of Pearl," said Brandon.

Val Foster grinned.

"Not me! I shirk responsibility like that."

"Holy snakes!" said Brandon. "Why did I become a best seller? I've never had a moment's peace since I wrote that fatal novel. I'm going out to hunt dollars. I've sold my soul. Lydia Beaumont told the plain and frightful truth."

His nerves were on edge. His face was white and haggard. There was a look of misery in his eyes.

"Cheer up, darling," said Pearl. "You're not going to the front again. No high explosives this time!"

"Take your places, please!" called the guard.

Brandon kissed his wife's hands. From the carriage window he saw her waving to him. He was being torn away from her. Only for a few seconds more could he see her loveliness, the laughter in her eyes, the last kiss she wafted to him.

When he took his seat in the Pullman car he looked a stricken man.

50

BRANDON gave an account of his American tour to Val Foster some time afterwards—a long time afterwards—and in his letters to Pearl, written on

long-distance journeys, in bedrooms forty stories above street level, and in railway waiting rooms, there are daily reports of his experiences and agonies.

It is possible that he exaggerated the horrors of a lecture tour. It is certain that other English lecturers in the United States have survived that ordeal, as some of them survived the horrors of war, without a sense of spiritual degradation or physical prostration, and that some of them return year by year with unfailing courage. There are even one or two who find it exhilarating, as a tonic to their egotism, and an excellent means of publicity. But Brandon was unduly sensitive, as highly strung as a fiddlestring, and a man of shrinking shyness. So far from desiring publicity, he shunned it as though it shamed him. Yet he had to stand in the limelight and the flashlight, making a face as though he liked it. He had to deliver himself up to organized "boosting"—his lecture agent had seen to that—which made him cringe at his own surrender to the thing he hated most.

Before he had landed in New York harbour, the Press photographers had set about him. They made him stand on the boat deck while they "shot" him at a dozen different angles. Six Press men and a lady reporter were waiting for him in the hotel to which he was driven by James Maynard, his Press agent, who was a very genial person, much amused by Brandon's efforts to escape advertisement.

"Now, don't you worry, Mr. Brandon. It's perfectly all right. You just tell the boys the first thing that comes into your head, and they'll make a story of it."

They certainly did. Brandon was amazed at the things they made him say, and at the terrific importance with which they invested some of the things they had tempted him to say.

FAMOUS ENGLISH NOVELIST SHUDDERS AT
NEW YORK NOISE

Worse than War, says Francis Brandon, hero
of Somme Battles

ENGLISH BEST SELLER DENOUNCES PROHIBITION

Aghast at Crime Wave in Chicago

AUTHOR OF "WAY OF ESCAPE" ADMITS ENGLAND'S
RUIN

Prophesies New World War with Secret Gases

England's Foremost Novelist Defends
Flaming Youth

Says Morality is Dictated by Climate and Custom
Anxious to Meet American College Girls

"Fine stuff," said Mr. Maynard when he brought up a bundle of papers with these headlines across their front pages. "It's this kind of thing that makes all the difference to a lecture tour. That was a happy thought about the American college girls. They'll be crazy to meet you. They'll keep you busy signing autographs in *The Way of Escape*."

"I don't want to meet them," said Brandon. "I'd run ten miles not to meet them. I never said a word about them."

Mr. Maynard laughed heartily. "It's in black and white, Mr. Brandon. You can't get away from it."

"It was that lady reporter who said something about pretty college girls and hoped I'd see some at my lectures. Of course I said 'I hope so too.' What else could I say? Now she prints all this bilge."

"Now, don't you worry, Mr. Brandon," said the lecture agent. "Everything's going to be perfectly all right. You're doing fine. There'll be a good audience for you to-morrow evening at the Carnegie Hall. Speak to the third gallery, and they'll all hear you."

"God!" said Brandon.

It was a prayer. When he stood in the waiting room behind the stage of the Carnegie Hall for his first lecture, he had a desperate desire to run away and hide. He had heard of people's tongues cleaving to the roofs of their mouths. He had never believed it. Now it had happened to him. His tongue was dry. There was no spittle in his mouth. He couldn't articulate a word when his agent came to have a look at him.

"A nice audience, Mr. Brandon. You'll get a great reception. I guess they've all read your novel."

"Water!" said Brandon with great difficulty. It sounded like "Worgger."

"Sure!"

A bottle of water and a glass were produced after a lapse of three minutes. Brandon drank as though he had just crossed a desert in blinding sun. He was cold, and there was moisture in the palms of his hands. He was

weak at the knees, and something seemed to have slipped in his stomach. He had to hold onto the back of a chair.

"I'll give you a word when it's time to go on," said Mr. Maynard. "Now I'll leave you. I daresay you want to think over your lecture. Nerves, eh? Everybody's like that until they get used to it. Before your tour is over you'll walk on as though you were going to say good-night to your mother."

"Look here," said Brandon, "I feel like death. Any brandy?"

Mr. Maynard smiled and shook his head.

"It would make you feel worse. Wait till it's over. Now, don't worry. It's going to be perfectly all right."

He patted Brandon on the shoulder and slipped out of the room.

"Oh, my God!" said Brandon again. He was doing it for Pearl's sake. He was doing it to save her from squalor. He had to earn these filthy dollars. He would have to go through with it. Perhaps if he prayed he might get a little courage. People said that if one prayed hard enough an answer would come. If only Pearl had been there he might have felt better. It was ten days since he had seen Pearl. Perhaps he would never see her again. He would probably drop dead on that platform, if he could get as far as the platform. He had pins and needles in his right leg. He had a stomach-ache. There was a cold sweat on his forehead. His tongue was as dry as an old bone. . . .

"Time to go on, Mr. Brandon."

The genial lecture agent stood at the door and beckoned him with a crooked finger. Brandon drew a deep breath and felt the pallor creep into his face. He advanced like a man going to the scaffold, and, like a warder sorry for the condemned man, Mr. Maynard took him by the elbow and helped him gently along a passage and gave him a friendly push through a little door to the place of execution.

Brandon was on the platform. It seemed as large as Paddington Station. It was a long, long walk to a desk with a shaded light. He dragged himself across that vast space and held onto the desk. Vaguely he was aware of his audience. A part of it was coughing and then became silent. A few papers rustled. Then something stirred down there in the hall, like a wave. Rows and rows of people whose faces were blurred in a hazy light were standing up. He ought to have bowed to them, but he stood rigid with his hands clenched on the edge of the desk. Then they sat down again. He was supposed to talk to them. That was what he was there for. He was going to lecture on the Younger Novelists. . . .

Pearl would have finished her dinner. Probably she was going to the theatre with Mr. Jerningham. She would wear her fur coat. They would take a taxi, if it was raining. Pearl always looked wonderful in an evening frock. . . .

Where was he? Oh, Lord, yes. He had to say something. He would have to say something at all costs—even if he dropped dead on the platform.

"*Ladies and gentlemen*——"

What an odd voice that was in front of him, a long way off! It couldn't be his voice. He had never heard it like that before. It was a thin, harsh, high voice which seemed to quaver up to the distant roof.

Somehow or other he began to talk. He hadn't the least idea what he was saying. For five minutes he was like a man sleep-walking. Then quite suddenly he felt conscious again, aware of himself, and curiously calm and tranquil, as if he had recovered from a long illness and was in the convalescent stage. He was no longer frightened by that audience in front of him. He was indifferent to it. At least he had a feeling that as long as he went on talking nothing much would happen to him. It wouldn't get up and bite him. He felt even friendly towards it in a tired way, as one might be friendly to a cage full of tigers behind strong bars. Sorry for them! It wasn't their fault that they had to listen to the things he was speaking. They couldn't help themselves. It was part of the social system. . . .

What was that strange noise? Rather alarming. They were laughing at something he was saying about the younger novelists—that bit of irony which he had typed out in his rough notes. It was the first time he had ever heard laughter from the speaker's side of the platform. It was pleasant, in a way. It seemed to establish human contact with that thing called an audience. . . .

Something was happening to his tongue again. It was curling up behind his teeth. His gums were like sunbaked bricks. The back of his throat was a limekiln.

There was a bottle of water on the desk. If he could drink from it, he might get his tongue back into its normal position. On the other hand, if he let go of the edges of the desk he might fall down. Besides, it was absurd to drink in front of a big audience. They would see the water sizzling down his gullet. It would need the courage of a lion tamer to pour the water into a glass without spilling it, and then raise it to his lips. Better not try. Better lick his lips and try to get a drop of spittle. Appalling business, this. . . .

At the end of three quarters of an hour Brandon became frightened again. He seemed to have been speaking for six hours. He had certainly exceeded his time, which was an hour and a quarter. But he still hadn't got up to that bit about Aldous Huxley. Perhaps he had been asleep for an hour or two, or unconscious. He looked at his wrist watch. No, that couldn't be right. He looked at it again a minute later. Still half an hour to go? Perhaps the damned thing had stopped and people were still staying on because they were too polite to leave. He put the wrist watch to his ear and was surprised to hear it ticking, and was surprised again at a wave of laughter which rose up at him from the audience. Half an hour more. How frightful! Somehow he went on to the bitter end. He bowed and a storm of clapping sounded like machine-gun fire—exactly like machine-gun fire—in the wet wind of Flanders. Now he could go, he supposed.

His knees felt very stiff as he turned his back on the audience and walked across the desert of the platform. How did one get off? He couldn't find that door. He felt one or two panels which didn't yield. Very silly! The door had disappeared. That was a dirty trick. Perhaps he had better go back and bow to the audience, which was still clapping. He went back and bowed, wondering where the door had gone. He had another try for it. No, nothing doing! It was like a nightmare, feeling for a door which wouldn't open. People were laughing at his attempts to escape.

"This way, Mr. Brandon," said the genial voice of Mr. Maynard, who opened the little door and pulled back the curtain.

He became enthusiastic, patted Brandon on the shoulder, talked in excited whispers.

"Fine! Fine. You got it across fine. They liked you. It's what they expected of you. They're waiting to shake hands with you."

"What!" cried Brandon, terrified again. "Can't I go and get a drink?"

"No. They'll be bitterly disappointed if you don't show yourself below the platform. They're lining up now. Come this way, Mr. Brandon."

He had Brandon firmly by the arm and led him down another passage and pushed him through a swing door.

Brandon stood below the platform which had been his place of martyrdom. A long line of people in evening dress waited in a queue which moved slowly towards him. The foremost lady had already taken his cold hand.

"You looked as cheap as two cents," she told him. "But I loved every word you said. So glad to meet the author of *The Way of Escape*. I'm just

crazy about that doctor of yours."

She passed on with a friendly nod to make way for an elderly gentleman who grasped his hand and held it tight.

"My forefathers came from England," he said. "I went there two years ago and saw the tombs of my ancestors in a Sussex churchyard. Yes, sir, and I'm proud of my Anglo-Saxon blood. This country was built up by the Nordic race and is now being ruined by Wops and other aliens who commit all the crimes and disgrace us in the face of the world. I'm just going to say this, Mr. Brandon, sir——"

He never said it because of a white-haired lady behind him who told him not to monopolize the lecturer.

"My dear young man," said this lady. "I couldn't hear a word you said because you speak as if you had marbles in your mouth, but I just loved the way you look. I've read your books and bought copies for many of my friends. I was telling my youngest daughter only yesterday that I was going to give myself the pleasure of seeing the author of *The Forsyte Saga*. 'Mary,' I said, 'the man who wrote that has a fine mind. You may say what you like about Ernest Hemingway, but the author of *The Forsyte Saga* is a gentleman, and I like his spirit.' "

"I'm sorry to say——" said Brandon. He was going to deny the authorship of *The Forsyte Saga*, but the place of the white-haired lady was taken by a buxom young woman with horn-rimmed glasses who presented him with a fountain pen and the open page of an autograph album.

"I'm sure you won't mind writing your autograph. I've Jack Dempsey and Babe Ruth and Marshal Foch and Edgar Wallace and Professor Einstein. Now I want *you*!"

Brandon wrote his name, or hoped he did. He made a blot and apologized for the crime.

"Don't you worry," said the girl good-naturedly. "It's the absent-mindedness of genius. Edgar Wallace made two blots."

"Welcome to our city," said a young man behind her. "I listened to what you said about Aldous Huxley, and I should like to know how you compare him with our Sinclair Lewis."

Brandon knitted his brows. He could think of no comparison between these two authors. Indeed, he could think of nothing at all. He could only feel, and he felt like a toad under a harrow.

"It's an extremely difficult question," he answered. "Do you mind telling me what you think about it yourself?"

"Well, it's this way," said the young man. "Your Mr. Aldous Huxley seems to me a guy who——"

"Pardon me, young man," said a little old lady, "but you can't talk to our lecturer all the evening. Mr. Brandon, if you'll forgive an old woman—eighty-six, my dear, last birthday—I want to tell you that I read *The Way of Escape* with very great pleasure. I once knew a doctor in Wilkesbarre——"

Brandon was rescued half an hour later by Mr. Maynard, who hurried him to the back of the platform.

"Sorry!" he said. "But I shall have to get you on the night train to Boston. They're entertaining you to lunch at one of the women's clubs, and they want you to address a meeting of Rotarians at eleven o'clock in the morning. I hate to rush you like this, but Boston is one of our important dates. We come back to New York Wednesday. Is your bag packed, Mr. Brandon?"

It wasn't packed. Brandon got onto the night train after scrambling his clothes into a suitcase, crushing his evening shirts in the process, and forgetting his pajamas.

That night he dreamed that he was in hell and that Pearl was laughing at him.

He had frightful dreams on those night journeys. The coaches were overheated to suffocation point. When he slunk behind the green curtain which divided his sleeping bunk from the corridor, he felt stifled. There was no standing space as in the wagon-lits of Europe. He had to undress sitting or lying on his bed. The difficulty of taking off his trousers without strangling himself in his braces was not easily solved. The gentleman in the top bunk dangled his legs over the edge before retiring to rest, and snored with a vibrating resonance. A black hand—it belonged to the darky porter—groped behind Brandon's curtain, who thought for a moment that he was going to be garotted, but it did up the big button which shut him off from his fellow travellers, who were throaty in neighbouring bunks before they lapsed into a state of coma.

Mr. Maynard, who travelled with him, was a salamander. One night, when Brandon believed he was being roasted to death, he heard the voice of Mr. Maynard rap out harshly in the corridor:

"Say, porter, can't you get any heat into this train?"

The train rattled over loose sleepers. There was a screech of brakes followed by enormous and body-shaking crashes when it came to a stop at

station platforms. A bell clanged from its engine, whistles screeched, and Brandon shuddered in his uneasy, fitful sleep.

He dreamed nearly always that he had lost the thread of his speech before an audience. He struggled desperately to remember the words he ought to say, but could not utter a sound until he woke with a strangled cry of "Pearl!"

In the morning he staggered up, blear-eyed, with a furred tongue and a racking headache, and after the usual struggle to put on his trousers by lying on his back and kicking desperately, he crawled to the lavatory, where a number of cheerful men were shaving and washing in their vests.

"Some guy was having bad dreams last night," said one of these cheerful fellows.

He winked at Brandon as though he knew the guilty man.

"Hi! . . . Porter!" shouted an impatient "drummer" with a lather of soap on his face, "what do you mean by handing me two odd shoes?"

"Well, what do you think of dat?" exclaimed the darky. "Dat's de secon' time it happen dis morning. Sure if dat ain't queer!"

"Had a good night, Mr. Brandon?" asked Mr. Maynard with a geniality which Brandon found disgusting after his dreadful journey.

The iced water on tap at the end of the coach was a great blessing. Brandon poured it into little paper cups provided on a shelf above and drank greedily to quench his parching thirst. After breakfast, for which he had no appetite, the Negro porter fetched his bags, and Mr. Maynard became active and businesslike.

"Rather a full programme to-day, Mr. Brandon. Pittsburgh is going to make a fuss about you. The committee is meeting us at the station. There'll be lunch at the Rotary Club—they'll expect a little speech—tea at the country club, where you'll have to say a few words, and Mrs. Spencer C. Budge is inviting some of the best people to meet you at dinner before the lecture. She acts as hostess to all the celebrities. She entertained Marshal Foch, John Drinkwater, Hugh Walpole, Lindbergh, and almost everyone of note since the war. You'll like her. She specializes in best sellers and puts their books in all her bedrooms. A great little publicity agent, I'll say she is!"

It was five below zero on the platform, after a night in an overheated train. The tip of his nose was blue. The tips of his ears were white. A committee of efficient-looking young men raised their hats to him. Six photographers "shot" him. Mr. Maynard presented him to the efficient young men, who all assured him that they were glad to meet him. Maynard

whispered to them, and Brandon knew that his fate was being settled for the day. One more speech had been slipped in. Between lunch and tea he was to be taken to the Wagon and Star Club—a literary group. A few words would be expected. The husband of Mrs. Spencer C. Budge would take him over some steel works. The secretary of the Rotarians would drive him round the city and show him the residential quarters. . . .

Brandon had eaten something which had disagreed with him. He had a sharp pain at the pit of the stomach. Some invisible devil was driving a red-hot needle into his brain. He felt weak at the knees. But he had to pull himself together. People were asking him questions. In the hall of the hotel to which he was taken by his escort a lady reporter interviewed him for the Pittsburgh *Evening Star* on his impressions of American women. In his bedroom, where he was to be allowed an hour's rest before beginning his day's round, he flung himself onto the bed and spread his arms out, but the telephone bell was ringing.

"Curse it!" cried Brandon.

He had to answer it.

"Miss Mercy B. Brogglethorpe would be very glad if Mr. Brandon would autograph her copy of *The Way of Escape*. She would leave it for him in the hall with the desk clerk."

"Delighted!" said Brandon. "Certainly. . . . Oh, rather. . . . I'm glad you liked it. . . . Thanks very much."

Afterwards he condemned her, quietly and venomously, to dreadful things.

The telephone called him again.

"Is that Mr. Francis Brandon? Oh, Mr. Brandon, I'm just crazy about your *Way of Escape*. . . ."

He sat down to write a letter to Pearl.

The telephone bell rang.

"Mr. Brandon? Well, sir, it's good to have you here in Pittsburgh. I want to tell you, Mr. Brandon, that we're proud of our city. Yes, sir, and as the president of . . ."

Brandon made five speeches that day before slouching onto the platform for his lecture. Mrs. Spencer C. Budge had been very kind to him. Everybody had been very kind to him. He hated them because they had been so very kind to him. He was dead tired. His stomach had turned against him. He felt extremely ill. He had to go through his patter on the Younger

Novelists. He hated the younger novelists. He hated all novelists. He hated himself especially.

"*Ladies and gentlemen . . .*"

They lined up again to say kind things to him after the lecture. Somebody was going to have a supper party in his honour. They had promised to put him onto the night train for—he couldn't remember the name of his next place of martyrdom—in perfectly good time. There was a gathering of extraordinarily beautiful young women. They were very kind to him. They had all read his novel, or said they had. They all asked him to autograph their albums. In a prohibition country he did not suffer from lack of alcohol.

He drank more liquid fire in the United States than at any period of his life. It kept him alive. Sufficiently alive to wear a fixed smile, to say, "Thanks very much," and, "I'm so glad you like it," to laugh at American stories at which everybody else laughed, though he didn't see the point because he was thinking of Pearl, and the pain in his stomach, and the heat of the rooms, which stifled him.

All these American people were tremendously bright. All the young women were amazingly beautiful. All the white-haired ladies were charming, simple, intelligent, and sometimes motherly. If he had been at all normal he would have liked them. If his stomach had not turned against him it would have been pleasant to sit in their spacious rooms, to sink deep into their comfortable chairs, to look at the old masters they had bought in Europe from an impoverished aristocracy, to discuss life and literature with bright-eyed wenches who seemed interested in those subjects.

But he was not normal. He walked like a man in a nightmare. There were moments when he wanted to burst into tears and lay his head on the bosom of one of those elderly white-haired ladies and say, "If you don't put me to bed I shall die. If you don't take me away from all these nice kind people I shall go mad. If you don't tell my lecture agent to stop this torture of a quivering human soul I shall murder him."

One month, two months, three months. It seemed incredible that he lasted so long. They took him into Canada and dragged him back. They sent him down to Virginia and up to St. Paul and Minneapolis. They froze him in Winnipeg, and he was cut to the bone in Calgary by a thirty-mile wind at forty below zero. In Kansas City he lost his voice and regained it in time for the lecture by drinking a whole bottle of pine and menthol and wrecking his digestive organs for a week. In Wilkesbarre and Scranton he had two sleepless nights worrying about Pearl because he had had no letter from her

for ten days, his mail having miscarried. In the university of Ann Arbor he was made a member of a Greek Letter society and fainted in his bathroom. In Salt Lake City he addressed an audience of eight thousand Mormons and was entertained by a descendent of Brigham Young, and was sung onto the platform by a choir of sixty Mormon maidens in white frocks and blue sashes, who did not know that he had a touch of ptomaine poisoning due to some tinned tomato soup and felt like death.

The eight thousand Mormons listened with great attention to his lecture on the Younger Novelists. They did not know that he spoke his words like a gramophone record, not understanding them, not even thinking of what he was saying, not caring a curse about Aldous Huxley and Ernest Hemingway and Sinclair Lewis and Thornton Wilder.

What he was really thinking was something quite different. He was thinking, "This is the last time I will lecture. That man Maynard has booked me up all the way back to New York. Well, that's his lookout. Wild horses won't make me do it. He says that I can't possibly cancel his engagements. Oh, can't I? That's all he knows about it. He says that it will ruin his reputation. Serve him damn well right! He says that it will cost me a lot of money for hire of halls and broken contracts. Very likely. If it cost me every dollar I've earned I won't go on. It's degrading. It's a torture. It's breaking my health. I'm losing my soul. . . .

"Besides, I'm worried about Pearl. She has taken up flying. She hopes to get her pilot's certificate before I get back. Her grandmother left her six hundred pounds, and she has bought a second-hand Moth. Young Avenel is teaching her. She doesn't feel bored any more. She hopes I don't mind. But I do mind. I'm terribly anxious. I can't sleep for worrying about her. I'm going home. I shall tell Maynard to-night. . . .

"What on earth is this muck I'm saying? . . . The Younger Novelists. I wish the whole crowd of them were drowned. When I get back I'll strangle Aldous Huxley and pull the nose of Beverley Nichols. . . ."

"And so, ladies and gentlemen, as a novelist speaking of my brother novelists . . ."

The Mormon maidens in white frocks with blue sashes set up another chorus as Brandon bowed to their eight thousand brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, cousins and aunts. He stepped off the platform.

"Fine!" said Mr. Maynard. "You were in great form to-night. We have plenty of time to get the train."

"Look here," said Brandon. "This is my last lecture. I'm finished. I'm going straight back to New York. I'm going to take the next boat back to England. Kindly make all arrangements."

Mr. Maynard staggered back.

"Say, what's all this? But, my dear sir, you have fifteen more engagements. They're all booked. You can't get out of them. As a man of honour——"

"Honour has nothing to do with it," said Brandon. "I'm a very sick man and I'm going back to England."

"You can't break your contracts," said Mr. Maynard.

"I'm breaking them before they break me. Self-preservation."

They argued heatedly in the room behind the platform.

A fireman came to put out the lights. They resumed the argument at the hotel in Brandon's bedroom.

Mr. Maynard, who had been so genial and so smiling, became morose and bullying.

"You're a quitter!" he shouted.

Brandon was as cold as ice.

"Exactly. I'm quitting. That's just what I'm telling you."

"I'll bring a law action against you. I'll ruin your reputation from coast to coast."

"Blast my reputation," said Brandon. "I'm sick of it. It has been the curse of my life. I want peace and quiet. I want to be let alone. I want to get back to my writing."

"Now, see here, Mr. Brandon——"

Brandon refused to see. He refused to listen. Mr. Maynard had believed him to be a weak, amiable Englishman. He discovered an obstinacy against which he flung himself in vain. He did not know the secret of Brandon's will power. He did not guess that his lecturer was desperate to get home to his wife, and that he would fight his way through all the fiends of hell if they tried to stop him. Money, fame, flattery, publicity—those tempting fiends of hell—had no lure for him now. It was Pearl he wanted, before he fell down dead on a lecture platform, or perished of ptomaine in a hotel with a thousand bedrooms and a thousand baths. . . .

Financially his lecture tour was not a success. He had delivered twenty lectures at an average fee of eight hundred dollars, a round sum of sixteen

thousand dollars, or three thousand four hundred pounds in English money. But his expenses had to be deducted, although guaranteed. His agent's fee of forty per cent had to be deducted. The United States government claimed six per cent of his earnings. His literary agent in London, who had arranged the tour, claimed ten per cent. A year later the Inland Revenue Department would claim fifty per cent of what was left for surtax and income tax, based on the high average of his success with *The Way of Escape*. With indemnities for broken contracts, billposting that was never used, hire of halls which could not be relet, Francis Brandon might have made more by staying at home and writing a few short stories. All his agony had been in vain. He went back second-class on the *Adriatic*, thin and haggard, with his nerves on edge, but joyous because every turn of the screw took him nearer to Pearl across that gray dividing sea.

51

As he came down the gangway at Southampton his eyes searched for Pearl among all those faces peering up at the great ship as she crept to her berth. He had had a wireless from her which made his heart give a lurch of joy. "*Meeting you Southampton. All my love.*"

He had had another night to spend on board after the message and could hardly sleep because of his impatience to step ashore and hold Pearl in his arms again. Then, after breakfast, he had paced the boat deck, looking at his wrist watch every quarter of an hour. Now he scanned the faces on the quayside by the Custom House with all his soul in his eyes.

Where was Pearl? He looked for the wave of her hand. He might even hear her voice calling him. Queer! He could not spot her. . . . There was Val Foster, thrusting his way in front of the other people. Brandon grinned at him and shouted down from the deck, and Foster raised his right hand. Pearl would be somewhere near him.

Foster looked sulky. Perhaps he was fed up with waiting for the boat, or getting up early, or going without his breakfast. He looked as if he hadn't shaved.

There was the usual delay in getting off the boat. Brandon was shoved about by elderly women screeching to their friends on shore. The purser, who had read his novel and chummed up on the voyage, shook hands with him and spoke a friendly word or two.

"Glad to get home, I expect. Wads of dollars, eh?"

"This waiting is interminable," said Brandon.

It came to an end. He stepped down the gangway with his two bags, bumped them on the quayside, and had his hand gripped by Val Foster. Foster looked grumpy but held his hand tight and didn't let go.

"Where's Pearl?" asked Brandon.

"She couldn't come," said Foster. "She asked me to tell you——"

"Tell me what?" asked Brandon.

He was terribly disappointed. Perhaps her father was ill or something.

Val Foster swallowed something. He was still holding Brandon's hand.

"Look here," he said. "You'll have to keep a stiff upper lip, old man. Pearl has had an accident. She crashed yesterday on her way down here. She's not—too well. . . . The doctors haven't given up hope, you know. . . . Steady. . . . Steady, old man!"

Pearl had crashed in her Moth machine somewhere near Guildford. It was in the evening papers yesterday. She was in the cottage hospital at Horsley. Her father was with her. They were doing everything possible. There was a surgeon down from London.

Foster had hired a car to take Brandon to the hospital. It was waiting on the quayside. They could get there in less than two hours.

"Curse you!" cried Brandon in the car. "Why did you let her take up flying? Why the hell didn't her father stop her? O Christ!"

"Steady, old man!" said Foster. "Steady."

Pearl was quite conscious when her husband stood by her bedside and then fell on his knees and kissed her hand which lay over the coverlet.

"Sorry, darling," she said, smiling at him. "Pride goeth before a fall. I thought I was wonderfully clever. I've taken . . . a bit of a toss. . . . And my poor little Moth! . . ."

She closed her eyes, and a shudder passed through her body, and she gave a whimper of pain.

She had hurt her spine, that was the worst of it.

"We'll pull her through," said Mr. Jerningham. "I've got the best surgeon in England. Poor old Pearl! You know her pluck, Frank. She was mad keen on this flying game. And she was rather bored while you were away. She laughed at me when I said 'Safety First.' 'Not like a Jerningham,' she said. She wanted to meet you in her Moth and bring you back in triumph. She's

very self-willed. That's what's going to save her. Will power. It beats everything."

It beat back death for a few weeks. But not longer than that.

One evening when Brandon sat by her bedside, Pearl woke to consciousness again.

"Frank," she said.

He leaned over her hand until his forehead touched her breast, very lightly. He could feel her fingers playing with his hair.

"Frank," she said, "I'm off on a new flight. . . . The next adventure for a restless lady."

She laughed very softly, and he raised his head and saw that her eyes were shining with amusement.

"It's like your novel," she said. "What was it called? Oh, yes . . . *The Way of Escape*. I was trying to think. I——"

Her head drooped sideways on the pillow. She was very tired. She slept a little before she made her new flight.

Brandon is back at Willowbrook Cottage, living there with his mother again, as he did before he became successful. Val Foster goes to stay with him now and then. Mr. Jerningham lives at the house in the green which belonged to the old lady. Audrey Avenel calls in sometimes to talk to a lonely man, and often she meets him walking in the woods above Yeoman's Farm where once he fell in love with Pearl Jerningham and laughed at the nonsense she talked. Some people like his later books, but his critics accuse him of being sentimental, and they have never forgiven him that crime of being a "best seller."

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Winding Lane* by Philip Gibbs]