The Secret Sanctuary

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WARWICK DEEPING

THE SECRET SANCTUARY

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I

BEAL INTERVIEWS VARIOUS STRETTONS

BARTHOLOMEW STRETTON ESQ., was shown into Beal's dining-room.

"Dr. Beal won't keep you a minute, sir."

"Quite so, quite so. He expects me—I think."

Mr. Stretton put his hat and gloves on the table, and picking up a month-old copy of *Punch*, looked at one or two of the pictures and then discarded the paper with an air of impatience. He was in no mood to appreciate humour. He glanced round Beal's dining-room as though he disliked it. His restlessness would not permit him to sit down; it carried him to one of the windows and exhibited to him a section of Wimpole Street; iron railings, pavement, road, more pavement, more railings, a series of windows and three green front doors decorated with a number of very clean brass plates. It was raining. People passed with open umbrellas. To Mr. Stretton the rain, the pavements, the houses, and the people all looked the same colour.

"Beastly place!"

It occurred to him that he had never seen Wimpole Street till six months ago, that it had not existed so far as he was concerned, and that it would have had no present existence had he not needed help. And yet he hated the street as a comfort-loving man hates anything which associates itself with some very unpleasant and importunate reality. Wimpole Street was an ugly smudge across the suburban serenity of Mr. Stretton's vision of life. He had been a successful man, a genially self-satisfied man, and that Fate should have administered a kick to him just when he was entering the last lap seemed monstrous and an outrage. It was the kind of scandal that impels man to write angry letters to the papers—but this affair was too personal and too serious for such splutterings in self-relief. The problem—for it was a problem—stuck in poor old Stretton's throat, made his lower lip lax and querulous, and gave a slightly bewildered irritability to his blue eyes.

The street depressed him so thoroughly that he turned about and began to wander round the room, looking at Rollin Beal's exquisite Georgian furniture and pictures with an air of perfunctory attention. He really did not

see them, the beauty and the distinction of them; they were just so many chairs and cabinets and pieces of coloured porcelain and canvas. He had to look at something; the mental attitude of the man who reads every page of the morning and the evening paper.

An oval mirror in a mahogany frame hanging slightly tilted above the Adam mantelpiece showed Bartholomew Stretton a reflection of himself. Instantly interested, he paused, like a very young child. He put up a hand and smoothed his hair, and gave a little touch to his tie. An observant person could have told him that he belonged to a previous generation, and that he should have worn a white top-hat, a white waistcoat and spats, and black-and-white check trousers. As a matter of fact, he did wear spats, but they were biscuit-brown in colour. Mr. Stretton was very punctilious about being up to date. He was very punctilious in all the externals. When golf knickers were baggy, he wore them baggy. He was the most careful of formalists. That was why his son's disaster had hurt him so badly. He was sorry for his son; he was sorry for his wife—but he was bitterly sorry for himself.

The door opened.

"Dr. Beal is ready for you, sir."

Bartholomew Stretton was shown into Rollin Beal's consulting-room. A tall man with kind eyes and an ironical mouth rose from his desk and extended a hand.

"Well, how are things?"

Old Stretton's face betrayed annoyance. Always, he had found Rollin Beal sympathetic, and when a man has a grievance he cannot resist airing it in the sunshine of some other man's sympathy.

"It's perfectly damnable!"

"Sit down. Is your son back?"

"He has been back a week. And my wife, sir, has been unable to sleep."

He sat down. His blue eyes seemed to grow more prominent. In the most impressive and sentimental moments of his life he had always contrived to express his prejudices or his emotions by putting them into the mouth of his wife. It saved personal odium and suggested a considerate unselfishness. "Mrs. Stretton, sir, always says——" "My wife may be a little old-fashioned, but she does not approve," etc.

Beal looked at him with observant eyes. They were kind, like the eyes of most men who do big things, or live big, active lives.

“Nothing fresh, I hope?”

“Oh, not in that way. But he is so utterly unreasonable. I don’t think that we could have done more to soften the affair for him. My wife has been a perfect angel, and John has done nothing but sulk.”

“He feels it a good deal?”

“My dear sir, I can understand that, but what I cannot understand is his way of showing it.”

“Or perhaps—of not showing it.”

Mr. Stretton sat forward in his chair. His irritation changed suddenly and became an impulse of compassion; we are all of us egotists, and even our affections are tinted with various shades of egotism, and in Bartholomew Stretton’s case his vexation was largely a matter of balked affection.

“That’s it, doctor. While John was in prison his mother and I talked everything over. We have been very happy in our children, you know, Beal, and rather proud of them; there’s Reginald making his three thousand a year at the Bar, and Carlyon a managing director of Medmenhams at three-and-thirty. Well, we decided that when John came out we would have him home and go on as if nothing had happened.”

Beal’s eyes were faintly smiling.

“You did not even mention this affair?”

“No.”

“And John did not mention it?”

“He has never said a word. That is what has hurt his mother—wounded her. My wife is a very affectionate woman, Beal, and I can tell you she has felt his silence—his almost hostile silence, I might call it.”

Beal nodded his big head.

“But if you and Mrs. Stretton had agreed to bury the misfortune why should you be annoyed when your son did the same thing?”

Old Stretton looked at him reproachfully.

“But, my dear sir, perhaps you don’t understand. I don’t think you are married—please excuse me—I have no wish to be personal; I am merely trying to explain why John’s silence wounded us.”

"I see," said Beal, and turned to his desk and the open case-book which was lying on it. Rollin Beal was forty-five, young enough to sympathize with the younger man, and old enough to understand the prejudices of the father, yet the vital part of his sympathy was with the son. Bartholomew Stretton had lived his life; Beal doubted whether sorrow had ever touched him; a man with that pink and comfortable face had never suffered very acutely. The very way in which he wished to claim a sort of ownership over the sufferings of a younger man who happened to be his son showed how little he fathomed the rebellious deeps of this other and more sensitive nature. Beal's compassion went out to the son. Here was a man who had spent three years in the trenches, who had enlisted as a private and been twice wounded before he had won his company, and that other and far more disastrous wound which carried no visible scar and had brought him no honour. Beal, alienist and man of the world, had a warm heart and a deep compassion for all that generous youth which had laughed and died and suffered. He had seen the wreckage, the driftwood. No case had appealed to him more personally than John Stretton's. There was a likeness between them. As he looked at his case-book he had a very vivid picture of John Stretton, fine strung, sensitive, intensely intelligent, going tight lipped and brittle-eyed through all those years, to be brought down to a sort of ignominy, the victim of a spiritual wound of which no one could see the scar. It was a queer case, not a little pathetic, of a fine life balked and twisted, brought not only to apparent impotence, but to the very edge of disaster.

Bartholomew Stretton was fidgeting in his chair.

"The thing is—what are we to do with him?"

Beal turned on the older man with curious swiftness. It was as though his impulse was to strike, not a physical blow, but a spiritual one, and the austerity of his fine face seemed sharpened. He could be severe, and his severity was all the more potent because his eyes remained kind.

"You know the danger? I think that is the one thing we should keep in mind."

Old Stretton's face showed a slight increase of colour.

"You mean that his career has gone? Of course, he had to resign from Rome and Mellabys; in six months he would have been a partner."

"I mean nothing of the sort. Don't you realize that some day—under certain circumstances—your son might commit murder——"

Old Stretton bounced in his chair. He believed in plain speaking, or said he did, but when a very conventional man has become crystallized and rigid, he is apt to resent sudden and violent vibrations. And Mr. Stretton looked inexpressibly shocked. Beal had meant to shock him.

"It can't be as bad as that. I know you doctors always exaggerate a little."

"I am stating a plain fact. It might be as bad as that. Morally your son would be innocent, because when these brain storms arise he is not responsible for what he does. Remember, it has happened three times, and on the last occasion——"

Old Stretton put up an appealing hand as though to ward off a blow. "Don't, man, don't! The idea is too horrible. It would kill my poor wife." And then he added with a plaintive wail, "But why should this have happened to us?"

"My dear sir, it might have happened to anybody."

Beal's face softened. There was pathos and humour in the picture of this chubby, genial old Christian who had come through life with the idea that he and his were sacrosanct. Job-like he was almost ready to curse the Deity, the war, the doctors, his own incredible and undeserved affliction, but Beal did not want curses; he required the father's logical and kindly help in the healing of the son.

"Well, there's the danger. Now, what are we going to do about it? I know quite well how this is worrying you for John's sake. There is something very lovable about John."

Stretton's face twitched in response.

"Of course there is. He was the gentlest child of the whole lot. You know, Beal, when we are hurt we get rather touchy. I'm ready to make any sacrifice, and so is his mother."

"Well, we must all work together."

"What do you suggest? A nursing-home, or something of that sort?"

"No, nothing like that. But for this one leak in his brain your son is a healthy and a normal man. We have got to try to close that leak, give him the chance of leading a healthy life under circumstances which are the least likely to produce one of these storms."

Old Stretton nodded; he had become an audience, a docile and eager audience.

"Money need be no consideration."

"That's a great help, a very great help; but I don't think your son wants to be an idler."

"The trouble is, Beal, that I don't know what the devil he does want! If he'd only talk——"

Beal smiled. There were moments when his face became luminous.

"We have got to find out. It is possible that he does not know himself. When a sensitive and proud man has had a knock-down blow like that——"

Then old Stretton saw light; it may have dawned on him in Rollin Beal's smile, in the patient and subtle wisdom of this healer of broken souls.

"I say, doctor, I know that you are a very busy man, but could you come down to Esher and spend the week-end with us? I have an idea that John might talk to you. He likes you."

Beal turned to his desk and glanced at his book of appointments.

"I think I might manage it. I am free after one o'clock on Saturday. I should have to be back in town on the Sunday evening."

Stretton breathed gratitude and relief. The problem of his youngest son's future had scared him into a sense of helplessness. "That's awfully good of you, Beal. Look here, I will send the car up for you on Saturday. I was booked to play golf, but of course——"

Beal, rising, stood over him protectingly.

"Play golf. I shall want to be alone with John. And will you ask Mrs. Stretton to look on me as a friend and not as a doctor."

"I will give her the hint, Beal."

"That's right. I'll expect the car at two o'clock on Saturday."

Rollin Beal was busy for the rest of the morning; all his days were busy and he loved them, for Beal's life was good. There are some men who inspire gratitude and devotion, men of whom women speak with tenderness and not a little awe, the man whose work is as a fire to which the sick and the unfortunate come to warm their hands. Our little cynicisms and meannesses, our scoffings and clevernesses leave such men untouched. To them, the Pasteurs and the Listers of this world, the children whom they

have saved run to be kissed, and we—who believe and strive—turn from the little dirtinesses of some cad's novel, or the treacheries in an egoist's memoirs, to the patient and unsensational greatness of such men's lives, and take heart and breathe more deeply.

But if Rollin Beal thought that he had finished with the Stretton menfolk for the day, they had not finished with him. He lunched at one, and at half-past two he had his out-patients and his clinic at Great Ormond Street, where a hundred or more students, packed in the big room, waited to see Rollin Beal's thin hands disentangle with sure brilliance some complex knot. At a quarter to two Rollin Beal's bell rang, and his maid brought him a card. "Mr. Reginald Stretton." The three thousand a year man was close on the heels of his father.

"The gentleman particularly wishes to see you, sir."

"I can give him five minutes, Parker."

Beal found Reginald Stretton planted well and square on the consulting-room hearthrug, and in this tacit assumption of his right to all hearthrugs lay the inwardness of his success. He was tall, deadly pale, with a slight stoop, and a bald superciliousness that was disturbing to smaller people. His great rolling forehead, cold eyes, and dominating nose made him impressive. He was laconic and deliberate. He gave shy people the feeling that he was prodding them as he might have prodded a hostile witness.

Beal did not like Reginald Stretton. You may respect a man's ability and hate him all the more for it, and Beal had very human moments. To be able to heal people you must have the understanding of all frailties, and Reginald Stretton had no frailties. Beal had hardly closed the door before the barrister had him in the witness-box, and was cross-examining him in his flat and inexorable voice. Bartholomew's eldest son would have been a failure in criminal cases, but then crime in its physical aspects had not appealed to him.

"I take it that this sort of thing may occur again?"

"It might occur to-morrow."

"Well, may I ask what you experts are going to do about it? Here is this unfortunate youngster knocking about loose at Esher. Isn't that a temptation to providence?"

Beal saw in a flash what was at the back of this other man's mind, and he was nettled, not on his own account but on John's.

“Providence may be kinder than we are.”

He gave Reginald Stretton a blind eye. He wanted the other man to commit himself to the more or less brutal suggestion that it was annoying for him to have a young brother appearing at the police courts and getting sent to prison, and that this inconvenient ex-soldier should be caged up somewhere.

“I am going down to Esher for the week-end. I think I may be able to do something.”

The rolling forehead and the emphatic chin became more aggressive.

“I don’t like this delay. Now, can you assure me——?”

Beal glanced at the clock.

“I’m sorry; I am due at my hospital at half-past two. But, tell me, what do you mean—exactly—by delay?”

“Nothing is being done.”

“It is better that nothing should be done. I presume you are suggesting some form of restraint?”

“Certainly; in my brother’s interest.”

Beal showed him eyes that were not blind.

“The interest lies all the other way. You’ll excuse me; can my maid ring you up a taxi? Before I go, I may as well remind you I don’t want your brother fussed or frightened.”

Reginald Stretton remained on the hearthrug, looking at the opposite wall for something he had meant to say and had forgotten, and Beal left him there still groping for the thing that he should have said. He discovered it and got it out as the doctor reached the front door.

“If you assume the whole responsibility——”

Beal turned in the doorway and saw the other man’s big white face at the end of the hall.

“Certainly, but without interference, in the interests of my patient.”

It was an evening of blue, autumnal dusk, with the lights shining big and yellow when Rollin Beal walked back to Wimpole Street. He had been an athlete in his day, but walking was the only exercise left to him, so exacting

had life become. He had swung the door open and was removing his latchkey when Parker met him in the hall.

"A gentleman waiting to see you, sir. Another Mr. Stretton."

Beal laughed.

"Oh, well, Parker, all good things come to an end! What is the other name?"

"Carlyon, sir."

Parker took his coat. This elderly woman with the watchful eyes and the pale and restrained face contradicted the old tag that no man is a hero to his servant. Or rather, they both shared in the contradiction of it, and the little leisure which Beal had lay in the lap of this devoted woman's shrewd loyalty. She was a sure buttress against fools and bores. She had the manners of a great lady, and an eye that never forgot a face.

"In the dining-room, Parker?"

"Yes, sir. In a quarter of an hour I shall come in to lay the table."

But Carlyon Stretton, "Car", as he had been called at Cambridge, was a very different proposition from his elder brother. He was the younger brother, without John's sensitiveness and his reticencies, a rather frail man, but sanguine and full of vitality. He was energetic, generous, a hater of all humbug, one of those direct, spontaneous people who carry the world along.

"Forgive me waiting for you like a tout, Dr. Beal, but I'm worried about Jack. Can you give me five minutes?"

They looked at each other as men do when they like each other instinctively.

"Sit down, my dear man. Parker is allowing you a quarter of an hour. We are all worried about Jack."

"What I want you to tell me is, can I help, back you up in any way? I'm not here to fuss or to fiddle."

Beal took the chair at the end of the table.

"I fancy you understand," he said. "Your father and Mr. Reginald Stretton have both been here to-day."

"And they are both as blind as bats! No. Stretton Primus sees certain things clearly enough—but they are his things. I ought not to blackguard my brother."

He sat there with his alert easiness, smiling at Beal.

“Can I help? What I mean is, doctor, that a man in Jack’s position needs help of a certain sort, the sort of unconscious help we gave each other during the war.”

“Exactly,” said Beal; “you could not have put it better.”

He picked up a magazine from the table, crumpled up a page, and then made a movement as of smoothing it out.

“That sort of thing. Certain surroundings, certain people, some particular occupation. I am going to find out.”

The younger man nodded.

“Smoothing out the creases! Of course. But if I can help——”

“I’ll tell you. I am spending the week-end at Esher. I want Jack to talk to me. I think he will.”

“Car” rose, glancing at his wrist-watch.

“I have beaten Parker by exactly seven minutes. Good-night, Beal. And thanks—ever so much.”

Beal lit a cigarette. “How much more work one could do,” he thought, “if more people were like that.”

II

THE CASE OF JOHN STRETTON

ROLLIN BEAL spent his evenings in his library on the first floor, a room of cream and of old gold, calm, gracious and very still. The shelves were of oak, and Beal's visitors had often noticed the fact that there were no purely medical books upon these shelves. Everything worth reading in psychology was here, and beside the psychologists the novelists had a place. Or you could take down Mosso on Crete, or one of Stephen Graham's vividly personal pilgrimages, or the Life of Burton, or a volume of Keats, or a book on tapestry or English water-colour art. The humorists had a shelf to themselves in this varied and very human family of books, such masters of sly joy as Neil Lyons. If there was one thing Beal hated it was pedantry, especially the pedantry of superior people who will deign to write essays on the dead but lift a pompous leg over the living.

Parker cherished this room. When Beal came up from his dinner he found the big, amber-coloured corded velvet chair turned to the fire, with book-table and electric reading-lamp beside it, and always a bowl of flowers. To-night they were tawny-headed chrysanthemums. He had his coffee and his pipe. He read, or sometimes he wrote, unless the world could convince Parker that it had a human right to disturb him. After this very Stretton day he took up with him to the library one of his case-books, and in it he renewed his friendship with John Stretton.

For here, set down in Beal's rather psychic hand was a human picture of the man and his history. No detail was missing. As an alienist and a biographer Beal was most amazingly thorough, which is another way of saying that as a workman he was a lover. He had gathered his information from wherever it was to be found; he had gone in search of it, hunted for it with the patience of a zoologist.

The record began with a short family history of the Strettons, good middle-class stock, with no trace of any mental taint. There was peasant blood on the mother's side in the person of Mrs. Stretton's mother, who had been the daughter of a yeoman farmer in Dorsetshire. Bartholomew's children had all been healthy, normal youngsters, though the mother admitted that John had been a very sensitive boy and rather difficult, but at his public school he had played for the rugger team and held the school record for the hundred yards. Bartholomew, who was a shipping merchant,

had retired from business about that time, and on leaving school John had been placed with a firm of underwriters. He had remained with them till August, 1914, when he had enlisted in a London Territorial regiment and begun his career as a soldier. This earlier picture showed him as a clean-living and slightly reserved young man, rather fonder of books and of long week-end rambles in Sussex and Surrey than he was of games, but quite without priggishness and never lacking a healthy sense of fun. He had had but one love affair, and that had come to grief in the war, nor had it left any serious scar behind it. Carlyon had handed over to Beal some of his younger brother's letters, and one or two casual references in them spoke of this broken romance without any bitterness or pique.

In Beal's case-book the actual history of the affair opened with a letter—a characteristically breezy and vivid letter from a youngster—a Lieutenant Rendall, who had served under Stretton in B Company of the 5th Blanks. It was dated February, 1918.

> "DEAR DR. BEAL,—Your letter was forwarded to me through Cox's. You have asked me to be quite frank, and I will try to tell you everything. I remember the day quite well, when Stretton was knocked out. I think you ought to know that we had been in the line for eight days and that we had had a most damnable time, for when you were holding captured ground the Germans gave you no rest, and you gave them the same. Bursts of savage shelling, counter-attacks to repel, the ground like chaos, everything difficult—water—rations—getting the wounded away! Stretton had been fine, but he was feeling the strain. We had a nasty angle to hold, and as a company officer he never spared himself.
>
> "It was about seven in the morning when the brigadier and the brigade-major turned up. I won't give you the brigadier's name. We called him 'Slaughterhouse.' I think he was about the stupidest man I have ever met; his neck was as thick as his head, and he had eyes like blue marbles. He hardly ever gave you a word of praise, and he was a bully.
>
> "We had had a particularly nasty night, the C.S.M. killed and a lot of men buried. Stretton and a corporal had crawled out just before dawn—Stretton shouldn't have gone by rights—and they had managed to get a good idea of where the Germans were. Stretton had just got back to company head-quarters—two tin

sheets over a hole—when 'Slaughterhouse' blew in. Stretton had had no breakfast; he was worn to an edge, and you could see the red in his eye. And then 'Slaughterhouse' started scolding. Did Stretton know where the Boche front line was? Stretton told him. The brigadier said he was wrong; they couldn't be there. I saw Stretton's face grow as thin as a knife; there was a blaze in his eyes, a sort of red rage—you know, at being hectored and hustled by this chap after we had had a hell of a time. Stretton knew; he'd been there, and he knew this other man didn't know. Well, I saw that row coming, and so, I think, did the brigade-major, who was an awful little sport. He tried to stop it, but Stretton blew up, and in twenty seconds he had said things to 'Slaughterhouse' which half the brigade would like to have said. And then that shell came. It covered us all with dirt. The brigade-major was killed, and Stretton knocked unconscious, but if he hadn't been knocked out that morning he would have been up for a court-martial, sure as fate——"

Beal had added a note here.

"The point to be remembered is that at the moment when Captain Stretton was 'shocked' he had been under very severe strain, and his self-restraint had given way. He was in a blind, red rage; there was a complete loss of self-control.

"Also, it is of significance that he had been attacked by what was probably to him a repulsive personality. It is probable that the two men were intensely antipathetic. It was a case of hate, the impulsive hatred of the finer nature for the coarser one.

"Follow up this point; it is interesting."

Then followed a history of John Stretton's sojourn in various hospitals. There were extracts from case-sheets, quotations from letters written to Rollin Beal by one or two keen R.A.M.C. officers, the findings of various medical boards. Observations on Stretton's progress were jotted in since. "Slight tremor of the hands. Some sleeplessness. No mental clouding but a faint hesitancy in speech. Appetite and physical condition fairly good." Rollin Beal had included an incident which had occurred in a general hospital. Stretton had made a curiously unprovoked attack upon one of the orderlies, breaking his bed-table over the man's head. Beal had been unable to obtain more detail, either as to any possible provocation or as to the orderly's "physical type."

The records became more and more encouraging. “No tremor. Sleep good, and without terrifying dreams. The hesitation in speech had disappeared. Physical condition excellent.”

This part of the history closed with Stretton’s discharge from the service in December, 1918. His mental condition was given as normal.

Somewhere in April, 1919, Stretton had returned to his pre-war post with Messrs. Rome and Mallaby, living for a while with his people at Stow House, Esher, but this arrangement lasted less than two months. Beal had more than a suspicion that Stretton was bored by his people; at all events, he broke free and took rooms in town. He appears to have pulled through the restless post-war period fairly well; he danced a good deal, spent his week-ends on the river or in the country, and went to the theatre or a concert twice a week. He saw a good many women—but did not develop a very vivid passion for any particular woman. His attitude to life was rather negative. The war, like a severe spring frost, had nipped his youth, and the sap of his complete manhood had not yet risen with full force to his brain.

And then that second outbreak had occurred. Beal had no doubt but that the breaking of a bed-table over some stupid orderly’s head had been the first of the series pointing to that curious leak in Stretton’s self-control. The affair occurred when he was trying to enter a crowded tube train; the train was just in motion, the gates were closed against him, and a rather officious platform attendant caught Stretton by the arm and pulled him back. Stretton turned on the man and knocked him down. He was summoned and fined.

Later Rollin Beal had taken the trouble to hunt out the attendant and to interview him. The man was florid, thick set, with glaring blue eyes and a brusque manner, a heavy and aggressive type. He bore no malice, and his account of the affair interested Beal.

“He came at me blind. When I got up I was going to give him one, but he stood there looking queer, his hands hanging down, just as though he had hit me in his sleep. I couldn’t touch him, sir. It would have been like hitting a dead body.”

Rollin Beal’s picture of the third and far more serious outburst was vividly personal. It was here that he had been brought into the affair to advise, to heal and to defend. He had seen it all so clearly, that foolish crowd pushing and elbowing to board a bus in Oxford Circus, and in it that square, red-faced man of five-and-fifty in a stubborn hurry to get home and quite determined to board that bus. Beal could visualize the stupid selfish shoulders of the man, the stare in his eyes, his complete insensitiveness

increased during the war. Life had become more difficult, the routine of the day more of an animal struggle; the finer edge seemed blunted, and the women were as much affected as the men. Courtesy had disappeared. The herd does not feel; it stampedes and jostles.

Beal could see it all: that heavy man, round headed and bovine, heaving, his elbow against a girl's breast. He must have touched Stretton, pushed against him in the obtuse selfishness of the scramble. And Stretton flared. Witnesses described his violence, his taking the other man by the throat and throwing him down into the gutter. When the police came he still struggled, and then suddenly stood still, trembling a little, obviously bewildered.

Unfortunately for Stretton the man whom he had thrown against the kerb had a fractured skull. He was pushed into a taxi, and taken to the Middlesex Hospital. That he recovered was the one sop Fate threw to Stretton.

Beal remembered the police court proceedings very well. He was there to give expert evidence and to explain to laymen how a man who had suffered as John Stretton had suffered could not be held wholly responsible for such an outburst. He could still see Stretton standing in the dock, a figure apart, brittle with the tension of it, but very still. His eyes had seemed to see everything and nothing. But the man in charge had remained unconvinced. These acts of "wanton violence," as he called them, had become too common. One might wish to make allowances for an ex-officer who had been wounded, but, after all——There was the previous conviction. The police and the public had to be protected.

Stretton was sent to prison for two months. An appeal was lodged and failed. Old Bartholomew and Reginald had had to negotiate with the man of the thick head and the thrustful elbows and fob him off with two hundred pounds in cash.

Rollin Beal put his case-book aside on the table and sat and stared at the fire.

He had no need to ask himself the question: "Might it occur again?" Of course it might occur again. John Stretton had missed manslaughter by the narrowest of margins.

And the explanation? Rollin Beal had translated his theory into simple and untechnical language for the benefit of Stretton's father. "What I want to emphasize is that at the moment your son was 'shocked' his self-control had given way. Supposing we regard this self-control as a membrane—a piece of skin—stretched across a channel through which the vital force, or whatever

you like to call it, flows. Imagine this membrane, this trap-door weakened, imagine a sort of leak in the brain, imagine our most primitive and savage impulses able to rush through this leak and produce sudden acts of uncontrollable violence.

"Well, let us suppose this little trap-door weakened. It may be able to hold up against ordinary strains, but imagine some particular forcible impulse pushing against it, a particular impulse resembling the original thrust which broke it down. It gives way; something violent happens. That is how I read your son's case. As you know, he has a very vague recollection of what he does during these rare outbreaks. In every other way he is absolutely normal.

"Some people might diagnose epilepsy. I do not. I prefer to regard the case as a weakening of self-control, a mental lesion, a sinking of the resistance to certain strains. Association is a great word with us, but I think I am growing too technical——"

So much for the explanation to the father, but what of the salvation of the son?

Beal lay deep in his chair, looking over his crossed legs at the red heat of the fire. Being a vitalist he had a reverence for instinct, that massive force at the back of consciousness. He believed that a man could be healed through instinct, by giving play to the healthy promptings of it. A wrong instinct, or rather an old and savage instinct incompatible with modern life had pushed John Stretton to the edge of a precipice. The sudden lust to kill! The problem was to find its opposite, a creative, happy gentle spirit, and the atmosphere in which it could function.

Beal the man was touched as deeply as Beal the doctor was interested. John Stretton was so very likeable, such a fine weapon twisted and blunted.

What to suggest? Yes, there came the rub!

Yet he had a feeling that John Stretton's intuition might help him, the instinct of the wounded thing towards the herb that would heal it.

Intuition! That which is greater and more subtle than reason.

"I have got to find out," he thought, "what his inclination is."

III

JOHN STRETTON

STOW HOUSE, ESHER, was very much what Rollin Beal might have expected it to be, save that it was white instead of red. Its chimneys and slate roofs were visible from the road, but you won no complete view of the house until you had passed through the blue gates hung on white pillars, and rounded a bank of rhododendrons and conifers. Then the house burst upon you suddenly, smiling its broad white smile at the end of a lawn which had the colour and the flatness of a billiard table. It was an obvious house and it said the obvious thing. "Here I am! Yes, I am feeling very well, thank you." It had the appearance of being polished, for it had been repainted that spring. The polish extended to the drive and the garden, where everything was patted and raked and rolled into superlative neatness, and no errant autumn leaf was suffered to skip and whirl to the music of the wind.

Beal had one glimpse of old Stretton's house standing there in its white waistcoat before the slowly rolling car carried him up the long drive and showed him the figure of a young man moving slowly along the front of the herbaceous border on the far side of the lawn. The attitude of the figure was curious. The man carried a stick. He kept pausing and hitting at something with the stick just as though he were knocking off the heads of flowers. He did not appear to hear the car, or if he did he took no notice of it.

Beal was dropped into the porch, a classic thing with two solid white pillars. A maid stood at the door, ready to receive him and his suit-case from the chauffeur. The large hall had a Turkey carpet, a soft and very comfortable carpet like everything else in the house of Bartholomew Stretton.

The maid, setting down the suit-case, took Beal's hat, scarf and coat. She said nothing. She was all detachment, thoroughly impersonal. She opened the door of the drawing-room and for the first time Beal heard her voice.

"Dr. Rollin Beal."

A woman rose to meet him, giving him the impression that she had been sitting on the edge of a chair for the last half-hour, waiting to get up and make a speech.

“I am so very glad to see you. Dr. Beal; I am so grateful to you for coming.”

Old Stretton’s wife had blue eyes and grey hair, a weak mouth, the lips rather pouched out over prominent teeth. She was thin, tallish, long in the waist, with a back which seemed to bend easily, too easily. Her attitude was one of amiability, an amiability that was without insight or discretion, and smiled the same smile at coalheavers or kings. She was a woman who made a mystery of things without having any grasp of the essential mystery of everything. She had a pathetic little trick of trying to appear very shy and sweetly knowing, just as though she were trying to mystify and hoodwink some eternal child.

“I must apologize for my husband. He has gone to golf, but he went on purpose. Of course, you understand.”

She sat down, uneasily, looking at him with a conspirator’s smile. Beal sat down opposite her in this pink room of hers, pink in its cretonnes, its carpet, its light shades, its roses on the wall, like the artificial pinkness of her pleasant and unmysterious life. She was a good woman, a very limited woman, but Beal had a feeling that she would be saved by her good nature.

“John is in the garden. It is such a relief to feel that you are here, Dr. Beal. It has been a terrible time.”

Beal very gently assured her that it must have been, and then he tried to find out whether the mother had any intuitive knowledge of what was passing in the mind of her son. She was ready to talk, eager to talk; unlike her husband, she had not been irritated by having so painful a problem forced upon her affections at a time of life when people expect to be able to relax. She was an affectionate woman; John had always been her favourite, but the affair had bewildered her. She could make nothing of it save that it seemed part of “that terrible and wicked war.”

It was obvious to Beal that she had been hurt by her son’s fierce reticence. She did not understand it; she said so.

“He’s so funny, doctor. We have done all that we can think of to make him feel that we are just the same as ever, that we know that he couldn’t help what happened, and that the old home is home. He won’t talk to us.”

She shed a few tears.

“I had his old room ready for him—just as it used to be. I did everything. There were all the old books he used to love, and the picture of Dante and

Beatrice. He never said a word! He hardly speaks to us at all. Oh, it has hurt me."

Beal's kind eyes glanced towards one of the windows.

"You must not think too much of this silence. Some men, Mrs. Stretton, hate showing any emotion. They hide it."

"But why from me? Isn't a mother a man's best friend?"

He could not answer, "Sometimes, but not often," and so he turned the conversation towards the object of his visit.

"I want to see as much of John as I can. Men sometimes talk to doctors. That mustn't make you jealous. We are fellow conspirators, Mrs. Stretton."

She rallied to that, and getting up with her air of sweet knowingness, tiptoed to the window and peeped out. She made a mystery of it, as she made a mystery of everything.

"Yes, he is still there. Now what on earth is he doing with that stick?"

The stoop showed in her figure. She drooped over the eternal child idea, blindly sentimental even when a grown man raged.

"Perhaps you would like to go out to John?"

Beal welcomed the suggestion, and he went.

Autumn has a way of coming into a garden with a broad sweep of the hand, a gesture of liberation, of a queen claiming her own. A wild beauty returns, and with it a touch of sadness; the last flowers hang heavy with dew; the leaves are yellowing on the stems; man's ordered neatness becomes a tangle, a mystery. But in this garden of the Strettons man still held his own, defying autumn with a forest of green stakes and a spider-work of bast, with scissors and hoe, lawn-sweeper and broom. In it Beal heard the voice of the conventional soul, the soul which has a horror of mystery and of the uncomfortable and changeful, things it cannot understand. "Security—security! Let us have chrysanthemums in pots. Let us stake the dahlias, and parade the begonias like bits of coloured tin in rows. Let us have our bacon and eggs at nine o'clock each morning, and our bridge at nine each night. Security—comfortable security. Great goddess, we love thee."

Rounding a bank of Michaelmas daisies, sheaves of green starred white and rose and purple, Beal came upon a living protest against the Stretton worship of security. Old Bartholomew loved labels; if he could read the name of a thing he felt that he knew all about it, and there were times in the

year when the Stretton garden grew labels and no flowers. Neat white pegs stuck in everywhere, or little zinc lockets dangling from the throats of the bushes and the trees. And here was Jack Stretton with his stick swiping deliberately at every label within reach, sending them flying out of the ground.

Beal felt relieved. It was as though a black panther had got into a suburban back garden and was making things interesting.

"Hallo, doctor!"

Beal saw the other man's eyes light up. Often it had been Beal's experience to be met with suspicion, for those who are sick in mind may see in the physician the judge and arbiter, the man who can deny to them the precious privilege of sanity. Beal knew that look, the animal's fear of the cage, but Stretton's eyes met his without distrust.

"I'm glad you've come."

He gave a last swipe at a label.

"Look at these fool things!"

And then he faced Beal, smiling slightly, the lovable rebel, a man whose eyes had a deadly sincerity. He was not asking anybody to perpetuate illusions. He knew his own danger, and it was probable that he realized his own immediate helplessness.

"The pater's at golf."

"I know," said Beal.

"You have seen my mother."

"She suggested I should come out here."

He looked at John Stretton. He felt that he had never seen him so vividly, so much himself, the slim, tallish, whipcord figure, the brittle blue-grey eyes, the head held rather high with its intelligent and slightly sloping forehead and pointed chin suggesting movement and the forward urge and uplift of the prow of a ship. The figure was a little defiant. It confronted things that were calculable and incalculable. There was something about it too that suggested helplessness, appeal, a look that touched Beal very deeply. It was like youth, wounded, suffering, proud, crying with its dumb eyes: "Doctor, get me out of this!"

Stretton glanced at the house with its flat, white smile.

“Everything is dead here, you know, dead as——”

And then he swung round again and faced Beal.

“Look here, I have got to talk. If I don’t——”

“Of course,” said Beal, “that’s what I have come for. I’m glad.”

They began to wander up and down together, and Beal noticed that Stretton kept as far away from the house as possible, favouring the stretch of grass beyond the cedar. He was restless, extremely restless. He kept prodding the ground with his stick. Now that he could talk and had the very man to whom he could talk unconstrainedly, he found himself inarticulate. He just blurted things with a half brutal boyish sincerity.

“I feel I want to get out of the whole damned show. But I’m tied up in it. Just like this garden with all those infernal labels.”

He swung about and looked almost fiercely at Beal.

“Don’t try and gloze things over, doctor. I’m sick of this ‘hush camp.’ I’m a case. I’m not afraid of facing it; one got used to that out there.”

He smacked with his stick at a branch of the decorous cedar.

“But after all those years, to come back as a potential murderer, a sort of live shell which everybody is afraid of! It sounds absurd, doesn’t it?”

Beal said quietly that nothing is absurd except ignorance and conceit, and the vulgarity which does not know that it is vulgar.

“You are going to get well, Jack.”

And then Stretton blazed.

“But not here. Don’t think me a beast, but look at that damned house! Just look at it, like a fat, respectable stomach! I tell you what it is, Beal, I see things too clearly. The pater is the kindest-hearted old soul, but there are times when he hates me. I’m a thing which every decent middle-class person hates, a problem, like the unemployed, you know, or the ex-soldier. We are always in such a hurry to forget uncomfortable things, and I’m an uncomfortable thing. Poor old dad; he gets me at breakfast; he gets me in the morning paper. He has reached the age when he wants to potter, and he can’t forget that he has a live shell in the house.”

He laughed, a laugh which made Beal wince.

“And then there’s the mater! Poor old mater! She goes about on tiptoe; she’s always watching me and pretending she’s not watching me; I believe

she would like to have everything padded with feather beds. All the while she has been wanting me to do the goody book thing, get down on my knees and put my head in her lap and blub. And I can't, Beal. And I know it hurts her. She doesn't understand. I don't want to be sentimental about myself; I want to fight, man, fight."

"So you shall, my dear chap."

Stretton calmed down a little after that.

"After all, it's not their fault. They are only part of the scheme of things. They are kind; most people are kind, but the bother is they don't know how to be kind in the right way. And there is no getting away from the fact that I'm a nuisance, an infernal problem. There is only one person who has made me really mad."

"And who's that?"

"That blessed brother of mine, Reginald. He's a selfish swine, Beal. Excuse my language; I'm not quite nice and civilized again yet. I call a spade a spade."

"Don't worry about Reginald. Carlyon understands."

"Oh, Car's a sport," and he gave a flourish of the stick.

His voice lost its note of resentment. He had exploded; he had said things which he had been spoiling to say, and he felt better for it; he had said them to a man who understood the psychological virtue of a good curse or a grumble. "Blessed are those who curse, for they shall be eased with words." A gentler mood descended upon him. He was still the rebel who retained his sense of honour. He paused by the cedar, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his old brown Norfolk jacket, his stick cocked under one arm and protruding behind his shoulder, an old war attitude unconsciously assumed. His face and eyes softened. He looked at the white house almost with a glimmer of tenderness.

"Well, that's got rid of the daily hate. What surprises me most, doctor, is how we change. Five years ago I was quite fond of this place. I accepted it then; I hadn't begun the clash with people. But now—— I feel I can't think here or get a grip on anything."

He glanced at his wrist-watch.

"I say, would you care for a walk? Or, what's better, I might get Smith to run us out to Wisley in the car. He can drop us and go back to fetch the pater, and we can idle about in the woods and walk home?"

“Excellent idea.”

“It won’t bore you? We shall miss tea, and we shall not be back till after dark.”

“I’m not often bored,” said Beal, “if that is any comfort to you. Go and fix up with Smith for the car.”

IV

STRETTON FEELS HIS HANDS

THE car dropped them on Ockham Common, and Stretton turned straight from the black road to the heather.

"Let's get off the track," he said.

They made for a great knoll covered with Scotch firs. A soft autumnal sunset was very near, and the level rays of the sun lay gently on these splendid trees, lighting up the rust-red and orange of their throats and powdering their green tops with gold. There was no wind moving. The slopes of the hillock were slippery with fallen fir needles. The place had an intense stillness, and Beal—very sensitive to all impressions—felt that when they passed in among the tree trunks a curtain of mystery fell behind them. The road was less than a hundred yards away, and full of the haste and hootings of many cars heading Londonwards after the Saturday rush somewhere out and somewhere home. And yet the road and its machine-made life did not seem to matter. On the knoll with its soaring trees life was on a different plane, and these hooting hurrying things belonged to a cruder and a more material world.

They sat down among the firs. Stretton, with his arms about his knees, seemed interested for the moment in watching the stampede upon the road. Cars of every type and colour went by, like shuttles attached to a black thread, and shot mechanically from one point to another. Motor-bicycles detonated and buzzed among and between the larger beasts of the herd. The whole road seemed to flow from nowhere to nowhere. And yet this stream of restlessness had a fascination, an ironical suggestiveness, the haste of people escaping from something. And what was that something? Themselves, boredom, the thoughts that might come to them in a solitary place? Did they drive, or were they driven?

"Do you notice anything, doctor?"

Stretton's face was tilted, and there were faint lines about his eyes.

"It is all profile," said Beal.

"That's the very word. I have been watching those people, and I have seen only one face turned this way. They look straight up the road. Do you think they see anything else?"

“Perhaps not. Most people are in such a hurry.”

“Speeding up the Deity, what, till he becomes an Ike in a forty horse-power car! I wonder what pleasure they get out of it?”

“Oh, something,” said Beal; “tree philosophy isn’t fashionable. That’s the crowd’s idea of progress.”

Stretton stood up. He leant against the trunk of a fir, and his eyes went to the tree tops, while one hand moved to and fro with a caressing motion, the fingers rubbing against the bark. His face was very much softer; it had lost its expression of strain and of fierce bafflement, and to Beal his slim, tallish figure became one with the trees.

“I feel that I want to get away from that sort of crowd, Beal, from the whole machine-made show. And yet I am tied up in it.”

“How?”

His eyes left the tree tops and met Beal’s.

“Well, you sec, I haven’t a shilling. Even my tobacco comes out of the governor’s pocket. Pretty humiliating after four years of war, and I am still rather proud. We were proud out there.”

“Why do you say ‘still’?”

“Doesn’t pride wear rather thin when the world rubs you to the bone? I’ve been told so. And I have seen it pretty threadbare—men turned spongers for the sake of someone else.”

“Oh, it depends,” said Beal; “I remember a poor devil telling me he couldn’t afford to be proud; but he had pride of a sort; he shot himself. You are not going to do that.”

Stretton looked at him, and his eyes held a challenge.

“How do you know?”

“I don’t know. There are two sorts of suicide, the reasoned considered suicide, and the suicide of impulse. But—bosh, my dear chap, life’s too good; fill up your pipe.”

He brought out his own pipe, and standing up stood looking towards the further woods with the glow of the sunset upon them. His face seemed to grow luminous in sympathy.

“Just that,” he said, pointing with the stem of his pipe, “and dozens of things like that. We talk such a lot of drivel at times, but get down to

bedrock. There are things that matter, and matter so deucedly, that they won't let us alone. We simply can't chuck in our hands. Don't you believe that there is something behind it all?"

"I don't know, Beal. Do you?"

Beal was filling his pipe. He lit a match, and holding the flame to the tobacco, sucked steadily.

"Just as much as I believe my tobacco will burn."

"I thought no scientific people would allow——Of course, there are exceptions."

"Pretty good exceptions. What about Pasteur, for instance? Was ever a man more thorough as a scientist? Was there ever a man who helped humanity as he did? Look here, Jack, about fifty years ago the scientific school got a swelled head; it was bumptious and aggressive, and it had excuses, but that swelled headedness has been coming down. Now we are allowed to mention a thing called intuition. I believe in intuition. I believe some of the older people used to call it faith."

"Faith in what?" said Stretton with a slightly defiant lift of the chin; "that we are the best sort of people in the best sort of world!"

Beal stood a moment with the bowl of his pipe gripped in one hand.

"No; that we are here to learn, that we have been here before, and that we shall be here again. But come on, reincarnation or no reincarnation, I want a walk."

He plunged down the hill, carrying his hat in his hand, and Stretton went after him.

"I say, doctor, one moment."

Beal paused on the low bank surrounding the mound. His face still had its luminous distant look.

"Do you really believe that we are here to be taught?"

"I do. It is the only belief which explains things, pain, and disease, and poverty, and wars, and love, and that something in us which is always reaching out to that which is felt but not seen."

"You mean, that if we go on being vulgar and beastly and selfish, and refuse to learn, we are bunged back into life until we do?"

"Exactly."

“But that’s mysticism!”

“One of your father’s labels! What’s behind, beyond? Come along.”

He had one glimpse of Stretton’s face as they turned together towards the further woods where the yellow bracken foamed at the feet of the trees. It was a face which seemed to flash out at life like a suddenly uncovered lamp. The man had a look of swiftness, of the runner suddenly leaping forward towards a new horizon which a lifting fog had uncovered. He seemed to hold his breath for a moment, and then to breathe more deeply.

“Beal, I was going to ask you a question, but now I am wondering whether I ought to ask it.”

“I should ask it.”

“Do you think it is ever going to happen again?”

He did not look at his companion, but walked straight forward with his eyes on the woods, nor did he see the contraction of Beal’s forehead, or realize the other man’s struggle with a sudden temptation. Beal believed in suggestion, but there were occasions when suggestion might be a dangerous lie.

“It may.”

He spoke quietly, but quickly, a deft surgeon doing what he had to do and knowing that he was inflicting pain.

“It may, and it may not. I don’t want to use a lot of technical language. Supposing I say that you came out of the war with a mental wound, and that the wound has not quite healed, but that there is no reason why it should not be healed.”

“I see,” said Stretton, still looking into the distance and brushing the bracken with his hands.

They were moving slowly up the slope of a hill with their backs to the sunset, and at the top of the hill they turned and looked back. The knoll across the valley stood outlined against the sky, its black trees rising in a sheaf with the red sun in their midst. The stretches of faded heather were full of reds and purples.

“Yes, it does matter,” said Stretton very softly.

They walked on under the autumnal trees, and for a while Stretton had a silent fit upon him; he was feeling things, not thinking about them; the mood was intuitive, much as Rollin Beal had wished it to be. There are some

problems that cannot be reasoned out, others that can be argued about till they become dead and formal. Life is otherwise; it strikes a sudden blow on the hot iron, or comes with a rush of spring sunlight from behind a cloud.

Stretton began to talk. At first he seemed to be groping his way, but in a little while he saw life clearly, and his voice grew stronger and more assured.

"It seems to me that I have got to break away on my own. You have to sail your own ship on your own sea. I feel that I want to get right away—in among a lot of trees. I don't need people; people irritate me, but if I have to have people I should like them to be people who do things, simple things."

"Yes, I see all that," said Beal.

They emerged upon a sandy lane, and Stretton turned to the right.

"I know a quiet way back, away from those cars."

He walked with his head up, and with a new air of elasticity.

"Machines seem to pick up the personalities of the people who use them. They cease to be things. Do you know what I mean? Yes, of course you do. People get on my nerves, Beal, the modern people who rush about and who can't sit still. Things don't, things like trees and plants and tools. I like to look at them, handle them. They seem to give you something which a lot of chattering, newspaper humans never do."

And then he stretched out his hands, arms stiff, fingers extended. His spread fingers closed upon his palms.

"I feel that I want to use my hands, hold things, you know, work with them. It's as though I had a crave in me for that sort of life. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly. It's somewhere in your blood and marrow."

Dusk fell upon them in the lane as it went from woodland to meadow and from meadow to woodland, the autumn colouring of the hedgerows growing dim like the colours in an old and faded picture. The sky, streaked with red under a shelf of purple cloud, changed to pale gold. Stretton's face seemed to stand out from it with a glowing meditative seriousness. Even when the darkness came his face retained a suggestion of light.

"Well, that is the idea, that is the feeling I have. It is not that I am funking my fellow men. I had plenty of solitude in jail, and I am not afraid

of solitude; in fact, I think I want it. I'm strong, physically, and pretty hard. I don't get worried about the weather."

He laughed.

"That's a good sign, isn't it? Now where does all this lead to, doctor? There must be a particular sort of life which would help me to make good. Do you agree?"

"Certainly. Put your inclination into words."

"I feel that I would like to own a bit of land, a bit of rather wild land, with some wood and heather. There might be a cottage or I would put up a shack of my own. I would teach myself to grow things and to make things. In time I would learn to farm in a small way. Do you see the sort of life I mean?"

Beal walked for fifty yards before answering him.

"Well, why not?" And then he added: "But it is not going to be an easy life."

Stretton understood him at once.

"You think that a man who has been used to knocking about town would be bored, that he could not tackle a quiet life like that?"

"It depends on the man. I would back nine men out of ten to fail."

"Doesn't it depend on what is inside the man?"

"He has got to be extraordinarily interested in things, and not very interested in people."

"Yes, that's true. But I am extraordinarily interested in things, Beal. I have found that out. It is part of my temperament."

"And it is an extraordinarily happy one, and a rather rare one. Well, why not?"

Stretton was silent for some seconds. Even in the darkness Beal felt a recrudescence of his spirit of defiance.

"There is one big obstruction."

"Money?"

"Yes, money."

Somehow Beal had expected this, and was not unprepared for it.

“Supposing your father financed you, bought you a little place and settled so much capital on you?”

“Isn’t that sponging? I don’t think that I could swallow it.”

“Your medicine, my dear chap, your medicine!”

“But isn’t it a rotten sort of thing to do?”

“Well, you can include me among the rotters. Do you know that my dear old dad gave me a hard-earned five thousand and gave it me when he was alive. ‘Look here, Roll,’ he said to me, ‘here’s a stepping-stone. I am pretty sure you will know how to use it.’ I did use it. And it saved me ten years of useless drudgery and waiting. What I have managed to do in the years I have had would have been halved, Jack, without that precious freedom, the power to work, to think, to investigate, to follow one’s own inspiration. It was a gift of the gods. And do you think I forget it? That, and the memory of the man who gave it are solid facts under one’s feet.”

Stretton had a quick answer to this, a generous answer with the edge of it against himself.

“Yes, but look at the difference. You had a career; I’m a cracked pot to be put carefully in a corner.”

“Stretton,” said Beal, swinging round on him and catching him by the arm, “get away from self-pity; it’s the very devil. It’s the beginning of a man’s decadence. Now I’ll give you a straight choice.”

They stood in the dark lane, looking at each other in one of those swift silences.

“Your father is a rich man.”

“I suppose so.”

“I take it that you expected to inherit something? Well, if he offers to give it you now—why be oversqueamish and difficult about it? Money is not dirty. We—the users of it—are either clean or dirty.”

Stretton’s head dropped slightly.

“Thanks, Beal,” he said, “but do you mind if I make one stipulation? I should like someone in the family to say yes or no to it. Do you understand me?”

“Supposing we put it to Car?”

“Yes; I will take Car’s verdict. He’s straight and he understands.”

They walked on into the darkness, while some five miles away John Stretton's father, the happy conqueror of some old bunny like himself, came out into the soft autumn night and found Smith ready with his motoring coat. The light from the doorway fell on Bartholomew's chubby face, his grey sports coat, yellow cardigan and baggy breeches. In one pocket bulged the three-shilling ball he had won; he always took such trophies home and showed them to his wife.

A voice came out of the vestibule:

"What about to-morrow, Stretton? My revenge, you know."

Bartholomew's face crumpled a little.

"Sorry; I've got a visitor; I'm afraid I can't desert him."

"That's all right. What about next Saturday at two-thirty?"

"Right you are. It's a fixture."

Smith helped him on with his coat.

"Dr. Beal arrive all right, Smith?"

"Yes, sir. He's out for a walk with Mr. John."

"Oh, is he?"

"I ran them to Ockham, sir, and they are walking home."

Bartholomew Stretton got into the car, and Smith wrapped a rug round his legs. Old Stretton's right hand felt the golf ball in his coat pocket. The car was swinging round across the drive, the light from its headlights flashing on the leaves of the laurels and the rhododendrons. Stretton stared straight ahead. His mind flickered with a patchwork of very human reflections.

"If only we can settle the boy's future! So disturbing! Anyhow, I beat Lambrick—three and two. That's the fifth ball I've won off him. He thought he had me cold at the thirteenth! Yes, I had John on my mind there. I wonder if Beal has any idea? Very sound man, Beal. Three and two! Not so bad when I was down at the thirteenth! I must show Lavie the ball; she'll be pleased. She has been so upset about John. Now, what the devil are we to do? We must do something."

V

DOMESTIC DIPLOMACY

THE STRETTON menage interested Beal. He came down to Lavinia Stretton's pink drawing-room, and found two women by the fire. Mrs. Stretton had introduced Beal to her daughter, a ruddy young woman with very white teeth who got up from a pink tuffet with the briskness of a boy and gave Beal a hard and vigorous hand. He was alone with them for five minutes. John's mother would have made a mystery of those five minutes, but the daughter with her ruddy and unmysterious face stood with two solid feet on such flimsies, and looked Beal straight in the eyes. He could see her in brogues, despising shinpads, leading her forwards and smiting hard and true.

Mrs. Stretton asked Beal if he had enjoyed his walk. She conspired with him in asking the question, giving him a little sly upward flicker of the eyes.

"The autumn tints were beautiful, I'm sure."

The daughter's impulse was to blow such sentimentalities to tatters. She looked at her mother with her stalwart and rather swashbuckling sureness, and her air of "Mater, don't talk such tosh."

"I expect it bucked John up."

She bounced down again on the tuffet, and let it be known quire frankly that John needed bucking up.

"He's a jolly sight too introspective."

Her mother threw a deprecating, reassuring glance at Beal.

Then Bartholomew came in, cuddling something in his left hand. He was pink from a hot bath, genial, ready for his dinner, and in a mood to hope that Beal would be able to prove this the best of all possible worlds. He sidled to the mantelpiece and deposited something round and white on the bottom of an upturned Chelsea cup. He had an air of expectancy.

His wife knew what to do.

"Oh, Bart, you've won again! Another ball!"

Old Stretton glanced casually at the trophy as though he had been thinking of Einstein's theory.

"Oh, that! Took it off poor old Lambrick."

"They will have to lower your handicap," said his wife.

"By the way, dad," asked the daughter, "what is your handicap? Old Lambrick used to be a rotten twenty-two."

Such are our children, and Beal made a mental note of the young woman's temperamental flatness. He preferred the mother, at any rate, so far as cooperation was concerned, for even if she did not understand her son she wanted to understand him, and she was eager to help. Old Stretton had taken the hearthrug and was snubbing his daughter by talking exclusively to Beal. Now and again he glanced at the door. He still looked expectant, but like a man who was waiting for an unpleasant telegram.

John came in. He looked at no one in particular. His mouth was curved in a smile, an absent, impersonal smile, elusive and slightly mischievous, and reminding Beal very vividly of a picture he once had seen of a gentle and satirical fawn looking out of a mass of dusky foliage at a naked girl combing her hair. He brought something elusive and eternal into the room, something that was before time, a suggestion of moonlight among old sacred trees, of naiads dancing, of the grail shining in the deeps of a wild wood. There was a spirit in him which listened to a sound of stirring in a forest at dawn.

His father glanced at him nervously.

"Well, John, well! Had a good walk?"

"Splendid."

He replied with an empty voice, and he went and stood beside his mother. Beal saw them smile at each other; Mrs. Stretton went as pink as her cushions. Her son's eyes had some message for her; there was a sudden kinship of feeling between them.

Madge Stretton looked at her brother as she might have looked at a man who had lost a race through being out of training. She had the hard, bright colour of to-day. She measured a man's success.

"Buck up, John!"

She did not utter her favourite cry, but it was there in her hard, frank, sexless eyes.

The gong rang and they went in to dinner. Beal was on Mrs. Stretton's right, John on her left, and Beal was aware of something passing between

these two, a quick and half-puzzled glance of the son's, a smile in the mother's eyes, and then an answering smile in the son's. Bartholomew, with white shirtfront and rosy face, sat like a chairman at a board meeting, slightly self-conscious and judicial. Madge did not utter a word throughout the meal. She had been put off her game—as she might have expressed it—by seeing a really impressive looking man showing an interest in her mother. She wondered why.

Beal made the dinner table a field of manœuvre. He wanted the party to split into two pairs, and for that self-sure young woman to be eliminated. He was so quick a gatherer of impressions that by the end of the meal he knew what he wanted, and when Stretton went to open the door for his mother, Beal, with an almost excessive politeness, followed as though to share in the act. Stretton had half-closed the door when he caught Beal's eye and that slight movement of the big, shapely head.

Stretton's glance at his father put a question. "You want me to clear out?" it said.

Beal answered it in a half-whisper.

"Go and tell her everything—what your idea is. Your mother, I mean."

Stretton looked at him searchingly. Then he nodded and went out.

Rollin Beal returned to the table and helped himself to port. Bartholomew had risen, and Beal saw his broad, comfortable back in the corner where his cigar cabinet stood on a walnut side table. He came back with two boxes of cigars and a tin of cigarettes, his knowledge of their choiceness swelling in him happily.

"Have a cigar, Beal. Try one of these."

"Thanks. I will."

"What! John has gone? Oh, perhaps it's as well."

His blue eyes looked at Beal with a clouded and almost furtive expectancy. After dinner and with a cigar between his lips a man hopes for comfortable news.

"I am very grateful to you for coming, and so is my wife. It's unusual, I know, for you big men to take so much trouble. A match? Here you are. I hear you and John had a walk?"

Beal knew so very well what was to be conjectured in Bartholomew Stretton's mind. There is not a man who does not wish to have his anxiety

relieved, to hear comfortable news, to find the expert, the magician who will lift the bugbear of an unexpected responsibility from his shoulders. But would Bartholomew Stretton pay the price? Beal had no intention of being too comfortable in his attempt to persuade an old man to sympathize with the unconventional tendencies of a young one.

"I want to speak to you about John. We had a long talk this afternoon."

"Oh, he did talk, did he?"

"Very seriously. I think all this silence of his has been a sort of preparation. He realizes his own danger."

Bartholomew began to fidget at the word "danger." Here was this mass of high explosive still very much of a reality in the house!

"Oh, he realizes that, does he? Have you any idea, Beal——?"

"John has his own idea. I think I agree with it."

Old Stretton said "Ha!" and blinked his eyes.

"You mean that he understands why he flies into these rages?"

"No, but he has a very strong inclination towards a certain life which he feels may cure him. What I mean is, he thinks he can make his own medicine."

"What sort of life?"

And Beal told him. He put the case very simply and very strongly, and yet Bartholomew Stretton seemed unable or unwilling to understand it. He met the suggestion with an air of puzzled hostility. As a practical man he had expected to be given some nice scientific formula, a plan all prettily drawn out like a scheme for the electrification of a railway or the building of a house. He had the pill-box mind. This whim of his son's seemed preposterous, futile, utterly unconvincing.

"Do you mean to tell me that he wants to bury himself in a ditch? My dear sir, I should have thought that it was the very worst thing possible, messing about with nothing to do, all by himself. Besides, there's no career in it."

Beal's face had a look of patient austerity.

"It depends on what you call a career. There is that other career to be remembered. I have warned you where it may end."

"But, my dear sir——!"

Bartholomew had the appearance of enlarging himself like a frog refusing to be swallowed.

"And you say you approved of it?"

"I believe in the instincts of the impulse."

"Oh—instinct. I thought that only dogs and animals——"

"A dog knows when to eat grass."

Bartholomew was touched by that. He could not follow Beal's psychology, but he could appreciate something which he himself had seen.

"Like Nebuchadnezzar," he said with vague sententiousness.

And then he surrendered. The part of him which had clamoured to have something done prevailed over the part of him which loathed what he called a pig in a poke.

"It sounds absurd. What do you want me to do?"

"Buy him a little place in the country, and settle a small income on him."

Bartholomew jibbed once more.

"What—lay out a lot of capital!"

"Don't call it unproductive capital," said Beal. "After all, the boy gave his youth, and we—we still have our capital."

He had him. It was not that old Stretton was ungenerous, but he had the conventional man's hatred of the impractical, the unusual, the obscure. Yet, even in full retreat, he hoisted his usual flag, the female petticoat.

"Before anything is settled I should like to consult my wife."

Beal had been waiting for this.

"I agree with you. Supposing we ask Mrs. Stretton to join us, and John too."

Bartholomew gave him a suspicious glance.

"I think—my wife—alone."

Beal nodded.

"Will you go to her, and I shall make John play me at billiards? By the way, it was a suggestion of John's that Carlyon should be consulted."

“And Reginald! Why not Reginald?” asked old Stretton with a lift of the eyebrows.

“Ask your wife about it,” said Beal. “Women sometimes have a knack of understanding these things.”

Bartholomew found his wife and son in the library sitting on the big leather sofa before the fire. Someone had switched off the lights—a woman’s hand, no doubt, and old Stretton turned them on again. He saw that his wife had been crying.

“John, Dr. Beal would like a game of billiards.”

With John out of the room, and sent thence with a little mysterious nod from his mother, Bartholomew stood on the hearthrug and confronted his wife. He hated tears; they made him uncomfortable, and Lavinia had always been a very comfortable woman. She had not inflicted too much emotion upon him. They were very fond of each other, and their comradeship was a plant of quiet and sure growth. They had never had a serious quarrel; both of them loved peace.

“I want to have a talk about John. Beal has been suggesting what seems to me a most unpractical idea—a little place in the country, miles from anywhere.”

“Well, why not, dear?” asked the wife.

Old Stretton stared at her, and swayed from foot to foot, assuring himself that the solid floor was under his feet.

“You know about it,” he said.

“John has been telling me. I think it is a beautiful idea.”

Old Stretton had nothing to say about the beauty of the idea. He was not a connoisseur of beauty, but he did feel like a practical man who is being persuaded into some mad-cat scheme against his business sense. He began to argue, quite gently, with his wife, but he found her amazingly obstinate—eloquently obstinate. She was feeling the affair very deeply, and she involved her husband in her feeling of it. She soon had him slipping and floundering, and blurting out fragments of affectionate nonsense.

“There, there, Lavie, I only want to do what is best for the boy.”

“He must have his chance, Bart,” she said. “I don’t say I understand it all, but I—feel—that he is right.”

“Beal seems to think as you do.”

She digressed to utter a panegyric on Beal.

“He has a beautiful nature, Bart. Haven’t you noticed his eyes—how they seem to look right down into everything?”

Her husband pulled his nose judicially, but could not say that he had.

“A remarkable man, no doubt. So we are to let John have his bit of woodland and his cottage. We’ll do the thing thoroughly when we do do it.”

Mrs. Stretton got up and kissed him.

“You have always been very kind and generous to me, Bart——”

“Nonsense; I’ve liked it,” he said, and began to cough and blink a little. “Bother this smoke. I think these cigars are a bit on the strong side.”

He turned about and threw the stump into the fire, and while he was doing it his wife made an excursion to the door.

“I’ll fetch John,” she said.

Beal was leaning over the table, making a stroke, when the door opened.

“John, dear——”

Beal made his cannon and walked along the table with his back to the door. He appeared to take a long time considering the next shot, and when he played it he muffed it. His face lit up with that peculiarly luminous smile of his. He turned a cautious head and glanced over his shoulder. He was alone in the room.

“So that’s that,” he said.

VI

BURNT HEATH

IT was a still and misty day in December when John Stretton first saw Burnt Heath and the Scotch firs of the Hadworth Woods.

A Ford car carried them out of Kingsbury and along the valley of the Weybourne, and, climbing steadily till the willows and the meadow country sank into the silver of the winter haze, lifted them nearer to the veiled sun. The landscape enlarged itself. The down country in the south was banked grey-blue against a dove-grey sky. Wild heaths seemed to smoke, struggling mistily with the sun. At Willowmaston the road dropped again into beechwoods and deep meadows, a brick and timber place with one or two old red houses looking out from gardens and park lands, English country, very green in the spring of the year. Beyond it the road grew sandier, trailing a pale yellow between thorn hedges and little farmsteads with their fields and orchards, pleasant and secret places where people might live pleasant and secret lives. They came to Ottways, with its limes and its one great cedar tree, and here the car pulled up for a moment, and Carlyon glanced at the little pink and green map he had upon his knee.

"It begins here," he said, "if that is Ottways."

The boy who drove them said that it was Ottways.

"Mr. Copredy's place."

Stretton looked at Ottways with bright eyes. It pleased him.

"Like a red bird in a green nest."

They drove on past the Rising Sun Inn with its two big yew trees where the main road bent eastwards to Hadworth. Here the lane began, with Lydiards on its left and a great ilex hanging like a thundercloud over the red and white farmhouse. A gradual mystery crept over the landscape, a wildness both in detail and outline. The hedges and the grass beside the lane began to fill with the bronze of the wet fern. The ghosts of ragwort and golden rod glimmered in the pale light. The wildness showed itself in outbreakings of furze and heather, and self-sown birches like fans of lace on sticks of silver. The Hadworth Woods rose in black mystery against the northern sky. And suddenly the lane ended; it seemed to dry up like a stream, or rather to well out of the ground where short turf, heather and

furze marked the fringe of Burnt Heath. On the right a white gate in a thorn hedge opened upon a grass-grown track. On the top bar was painted in black letters, “Romans Farm.”

Here, where even the lane ended, Stretton took the map from his brother.

“Up there; that’s where I want to go. That cottage on the edge of the wood.”

“Mascall’s Wood.”

They left the car and followed a path, a ribbon of turf which went on towards the woods. Burnt Heath stretched like a broken sea to the west, and on their right lay wild banks of gorse and the upland fields of Romans Farm. The farm itself cocked a red ear among the black tangle of its orchard and sheltering trees, but Stretton did not look at the farm. His eyes, bright with a boyish expectancy, watched the woods and the northern sky.

Car glanced at him once or twice with curiosity and doubt. Carlyon was a townsman, a Londoner who took his month in Switzerland or Italy, with an occasional week-end in the country, but his love was never happy unless her shoes were tripping somewhere near Pall Mall or Berkeley Square. The country bored him. He was perfectly frank about it. He was the man of affairs, healthily ambitious, and Burnt Heath struck him as being only a little less dismal and much quieter than the Ypres salient. And here was this brother of his with his stag-like eyes and head, alert, excited, sniffing the air!

Car felt his very modern brain in revolt under its bowler hat.

“A bit lonely, Jack?”

“Well, it is what I want.”

There was no doubt about his enthusiasm. When they tumbled upon the cottage, an old red-brick and timber thing standing in its wild garden under the very surge of the firs, Stretton stood stock still and looked at it steadily. There was the shine of some settled purpose in his eyes.

The place was empty. It looked shaggy, derelict, overgrown, its heather thatch slipping down over its eyes. A green and rotting gate hung awry. A big pear tree seemed to fill the little front garden with a blackish mass of unpruned wood. A yew tree brushed one gable with the ends of its green fingers.

Then Stretton walked straight to the crooked gate in the hedge.

“Got the key, Car?”

To his brother it seemed incredible that such a place should have a key.

Carlyon let John explore the place, remaining like a restless dog at the gate, and estimating the probable distances between a dweller in Mascall's Wood and a drink, the sight of a decently dressed woman or a dinner at the Carlton. He gauged Romans Farm to be a quarter of a mile away; its chimney and the outline of its roof were vaguely visible among its trees. Carlyon visualized nothing interesting there. Lydiards was another mile along the lane, and the Rising Sun Inn was a very tarnished luminary. Ottways? There might be petticoats at Ottways, but would petticoats be good for John? In fact, could he live without petticoats? But, confound it, this unfortunate brother of his would have to live without petticoats. A man who was not quite responsible ought not to marry.

And then his brother came out of the cottage, lighting a pipe and looking as though he had been talking to a pretty woman.

"It's just the thing; full of old beams and queer corners. That pear tree must be a picture."

He threw the match into one of the weedy beds with its tattered box edging. Carlyon was looking at the pear tree; he thought it looked wet and clammy and dead.

"What about water?"

John gave a quick turn of the head.

"There's a well, I expect."

He walked round the cottage and discovered the well close to the yew tree, a mossy oak trap-door under a sort of penthouse roofed with old tiles. The well delighted him. He came back with an air of triumph.

"Windlass and bucket."

"It ought to be tested, old man."

"Tested? What is there to foul it up here? Better than chlorine water out of a petrol tin."

Carlyon, the man of the city, felt the dreariness of such a prospect stick in the gorge of his conscience. He was very fond of this brother of his; his love of the warm complex life of cities made him shrink from this peasant's shack under the drip of the trees. What a life! To him it seemed impossible, pathetically impossible. Did this brother of his realize it, the loneliness of it, the sordid boredom of it, the dish washing, the lighting of fires?

He felt that John ought to be made to realize it, be compelled to look into its face of clay.

He stood with his back to the rotting gate, resting his elbows on it, and holding the path.

"I say, old man, I know you are in earnest about this, but do you think you can stick it—the loneliness, I mean?"

Stretton's face lost none of its quiet purpose.

"I don't want people."

"Yes, I know; you may feel like that now, but we are changeful beggars, and made of flesh and blood."

"Well, there are people to know."

"A few farmers and the folk who live at Ottways, a doctor and a parson, and the man who keeps the pub. Think of the boredom of it. It isn't as though you had been born to the life."

"Of course—sometimes—I shall be bored."

And then he laughed, the serious laughter of a man facing realities.

"But can you show me any place, old chap, where a man is not liable to be bored?"

"Oh, well, if you look at it in that way!"

"I don't. What I mean is, it is the inside of us that matters. If we are all wrong inside, artificial, mere materialists, boredom is a dead certainty anywhere. I had several alternatives, and I had a good look at them all. For instance, I might have taken up some machine job—flying, car racing, a be-reckless-and-jolly-to-day life, for to-morrow you may die. Or I might have slipped into some other post in town and lived a rackety, fatuous life. But do you think I could get any lasting satisfaction out of dance clubs or having affairs with poor little devils of girls, or meeting somebody in a cinema and then sneaking off to a seedy bedroom in some seedy hotel in a back street? A man has to choose, Car, hasn't he?"

"But hang it, man, life in London isn't like that."

"Of course it isn't; not for the ordinary man who has a settled job and a wife and all that in prospect. But you see, it's obvious, the war has not left me ordinary. I had to face that fact, and Beal helped me to face it."

His pipe had gone out and he relit it, while his brother hung doubtfully upon the gate and looked at the tumbledown cottage.

"Yes, that's true," he said.

He glanced at John, and he was struck by the contrast between the man's almost luminous face and the darkness of the fir woods.

"I'll tell you my secret, Car."

He smiled, showing his white teeth.

"Most of us won't face realities. How many of us liked facing a barrage? We prefer the easy, the make-believe; it is much safer to sit in a trench. But for the last six months I have made myself face realities, and I am finding out all sorts of things. I am not afraid of facing the life here. There is such a force as discipline, isn't there?"

Car looked at him, and the soul of him drew a deep and astonished breath, for suddenly he seemed to see not a younger brother, a boy under a cloud, but a man who somehow had got a grip on some unusual philosophy, a man whose eyes had the shine of a settled purpose. He saw what Rollin Beal had seen, and felt what Rollin Beal had felt.

"I beg your pardon, old chap," he said.

He found himself under the gaze of eyes of affection.

"That's all right. You want me to face the facts, and I have tried to show you that I am facing them. I'll tell you another secret, Car."

His mouth betrayed a twist of humour.

"I have found out that things are much less boring than people—live things, things that grow and live and do their job without a lot of eternal patter. And I have an idea that I am only going to like those people who live and work with things that grow."

Car smiled at him.

"That rules me out, I suppose?"

"Don't be an ass," said his brother.

They filed out of the gateway, and John Stretton loitered a moment as though absorbing a picture of the place with its shaggy thatch dark under the shadows of the trees, its wild garden, and its rough meadow ending in a waste of furze.

“I shall like to plant myself here,” he said, as they turned away; “plant myself and grow. Do you see the idea, Car?”

Carlyon saw it well enough, but his fear was that the growth might be stunted and eccentric. Still, all life is a question of taking risks, and the war had left John with a future that was problematical.

They walked back to the car, and found the lad talking to an oldish man who was leaning over the white gate at the end of the lane leading to Romans Farm. Stretton had a glimpse of a pair of shrewd blue eyes, a brown face deep with wrinkles, a grey moustache still tawny in the centre. The man’s face pleased him, attracted him. It was as restful as looking at a landscape or a tree.

The lad jerked a thumb.

“This is Mr. Viner of Romans, sir.”

They talked with Mr. Viner, or rather, Car talked and the farmer said “Ay, ay,” at intervals, and looked at the sky, the heath, the top of his own gate, Car’s boots and John’s face, with the wondering yet quite unrestless look of a man who lives his life in the open, and whose observation is acute yet almost unconscious. Sometimes his eyes lit up. They were kind eyes, humorous, quietly wise. Stretton was fascinated by the wrinkles on his forehead. There were four of them running horizontally and four others crossing them, and joining grizzled hair to grizzled eyebrows. The farmer’s nose was broad, like a good human, humorous life, neither too fastidious nor too fleshly.

Car was always frank and the farmer appeared to understand his frankness. Did Mr. Viner know that the Burnt Heath estate was for sale by private treaty? Yes, Mr. Viner knew it very well. No; he had no intention of trying to buy his farm. His lease had several years to run, and he was content to let it stay at that. The estate was a very sound proposition, as sound as anything could be in these restless days. There was going to be a slump in land? Oh, probably.

Car asked if they might take a cursory look at the house and buildings, and Mr. Viner opened the gate. His eyes smiled at John. The younger man’s eyes liked him, and the impression was mutual.

“Are you gentlemen acting for a purchaser?”

“In a sense, yes,” said Car.

John, walking close to old Viner and looking at him, hid nothing.

“I want to live here, up there in that cottage. You see, I got rather messed up in the war.”

Whatever Mr. Viner may have thought, he was not a man who pushed pins into bladders. He gave Stretton one very direct and observant stare.

“A man might do worse.” But all the same he wondered what the devil Stretton meant to do there.

So Stretton had his first look at Romans Farm. It lay in a slight hollow, an indentation in the green cushion of the gently sloping hillside. He saw old thorn hedges, a white fence, a stretch of grass with a file of white ducks trooping across it, a pond, a group of farm buildings in old brick and roofed with thatch or heavy red tiles, the bow and shafts of an old blue wagon protruding from a wagon shed, a carter leading a horse to be watered. The house itself, long and low, its red brick mellowed to a rich rust colour, stood back in the arms of its orchard. Its northern hedge was full of sheltering trees. Two stout chimney stacks rose above the roof. The deep porch was thatched with heather. In one warm corner of the garden Stretton saw beehives ranged in a row.

Viner nodded at the house.

“Solid,” he said; “they made good bricks in those days. A little worm in the roof, but nothing to speak of.”

His eyes met Stretton’s.

“Perhaps you gentlemen would take a glass of ale.”

They went in with him, following the direct and friendly breadth of his figure. The living-room was long and low, full of old furniture, and its windows looked out over the garden to the blue-grey haziness of the distant chalk hills. A woman with grey hair and a placid face who was sewing by the fire looked up and smiled at them.

“Mrs. Viner, gentlemen.”

Car was nearest to her.

“Please don’t get up. Mr. Viner was so kind as to ask us in.”

No one explained why they were there, and Mary Viner seemed to expect no explanations. She was one of those comfortable women who accept things. Car had spoken to her, but it was at his brother that she looked; her eyes were drawn to him, for John Stretton attracted women. And he, for some reason or other, crossed over and sat near her.

“I have just been telling Mr. Viner that I want to live down here.”

He was aware of a slight hardening of her placid eyes.

“No; I have no designs on your farm. The fact is, we think of buying the estate, and I may take on that cottage up by the wood.”

The woman in the chair was absorbing her impression of him, his clothes, his atmosphere of frank reality, his firmly set mouth and the slight sadness in his eyes. He was unusual. His suggestion that he might live in that tumbledown place up yonder was unusual. And then three glasses of ale arrived, called for by old Viner and brought in by a little woman with a snub nose and eyes that were both bold and apologetic. There was some casual conversation before Car glanced at his wrist-watch.

Stretton rose.

“We have got to see Lydiards.”

He held out a hand to the woman in the chair.

“Thank you. Perhaps——”

She smiled at him.

“We are very quiet up here, Mr.——”

“Stretton.”

“Very quiet; but then, you see——”

“I want to be quiet,” he said to her; “not like France. Good-bye.”

She watched him steadily as he went out of the door.

The farmer walked with them to the white gate, and stood there while the lad cranked up the engine and the Strettons climbed into the car. He was still standing there, gazing out over the heath, when the car turned the corner lower down the lane, for John looked back and saw him. It seemed to him that old Viner’s figure had grown strangely familiar, part of a well-known landscape, and this in the short passing of half an hour.

“Nice old boy that,” said his brother.

John hardly troubled to agree. It was not a question of old Viner being likeable; he was more than that, though Stretton could not have explained the significance this country figure had for him. Perhaps it was a human symbol, for men persist in setting up symbols. In five minutes they were at Lydiards, but the folk who dwelt in this other farm were not of the Viner

calibre. A lean, peevish, earthy-faced man in a hard felt hat listened to them with evident interest. To get a glimpse of Lydiards Car had to produce the agents' order, and the earthy-faced man went with them everywhere, watching with the cold eyes of an unenlightened selfishness.

On the Willowmaston road they pulled up outside the red wall of Ottways and took a peep through the iron gates. The place looked well kept, and most solidly English. A gardener was sweeping up the dead leaves on the drive.

"No problems there," thought Car; "Ottways people refuse to recognize problems."

And then a flash of colour contradicted him, the eternal torch carried forcefully against the wind. His eyes cried "Hallo!" The eyes of the girl said, "Men! Young men! What in the name of mischief are you doing here?"

She had steered her bicycle round the tail of the car and had dismounted within a yard of the younger Stretton's elbow. She wore a grass-green jumper and scarf and a little black straw Quaker bonnet. Her hair was red. It was her colouring which struck Carlyon Stretton; it blazed at you vividly from cheeks and lips, beautifully hard and healthy. Her blue eyes had a tinge of green.

She looked at both men with a casual quick stare, a look that both questioned and ignored. Next moment she had pushed open one of the iron gates and was remounted and riding up the drive. They saw the flick of her neat black ankles.

"All right; drive on."

The lad drove on, but neither men made any reference to the girl.

Stretton and his brother were putting up at The Moon at Kingsbury, and they dined in the coffee-room on the first floor with its Georgian windows and iron-railed balconies overlooking the street. Kingsbury was very quiet, and The Moon was at the quiet end of the town. To Carlyon the only audible sounds were the shuffling feet and the stertorous breathing of a very fat and ancient waiter whose thumbnail showed a black half-moon when he held a plate or a dish.

They were alone until a couple of commercial travellers came in and drank tea with their meat. This and the waiter's black thumbnail seemed to depress Car.

“I can’t stand these places. They make me think that every fly in England has left his signature somewhere.”

Afterwards they sat and smoked in the smoking-room until the commercial travellers followed them there, and Car began a series of fastidious yawns. He did not mind people being plain, but he could not stand them greasy.

“What about bed?”

As they climbed the stairs John could not resist a dig at his brother.

“Isn’t there something in my theory that things are less boring than people?”

“Oh, those bagmen? Poor devils! But I can’t say that I was fascinated by the hotel spoons.”

They arrived at a landing, and here a table and a platoon of brass candlesticks reminded them that there was neither gas nor electric light in The Moon’s bedrooms.

“Good lord!” said Car. “I suppose they used to supply slippers.”

He was feeling for his matches when a chambermaid appeared from somewhere and proceeded to light the candles. She was young and pretty, and though she kept her lashes lowered she radiated playfulness, the delight of being slyly irresponsible.

“A candle, sir.”

She looked at Car, and Car in looking back at her thought better of The Moon.

“Thanks. I rather like this idea.”

The girl gave John a candle and the same mischievous look which she had given his brother, but Stretton’s eyes were full of something else. He simply did not see her.

“Good night, Jack.”

“What’s your number?”

“Seven. Next door. There ought to be luck in that. Good night.”

Car was standing in front of his dressing-table mirror and untying his tie when he heard his brother put his boots outside in the passage and close and lock his door. The incident set Car’s thoughts moving in a certain direction,

and traversing such questions as self-suppression, celibacy, loneliness and locked doors. It occurred to him that Miss Isobel Copredy of Ottways was not a young woman who believed in locked doors. Yes, Car had taken the trouble to ask their driver who she was, but not while his brother was about. Car had a nice appreciation of women. He appreciated Miss Copredy's colour, even the very brilliant and provoking hardness of her, and so suggestible are a man's moods that Carlyon thought better of the country for having seen her. Burnt Heath had become sacred.

"What a flamboyant wench!"

His thoughts digressed to John and John's passion for the wilderness, but to Car it was a wilderness no longer.

"Hasn't Jack left woman out of the scheme? Now if I tried playing John the Baptist within a mile of that complexion and that mouth—oh, get along to bed, you silly ass! Doesn't a man ever grow up?"

VII

THE FAMILY DEBATES

CARLYON'S impression of the Burnt Heath country retained so much of Miss Isobel Copredy's colour that his report on it to Bartholomew was not wholly that of a business man. Car had been acting as confidential friend to the whole family, with Rollin Beal in the background, and Messrs. Groob and Giddy, of Pride Street, as purveyors of possible properties anywhere within a hundred miles of St. Paul's. There had been expeditions into Sussex, Hampshire and Bucks, but John's eyes had brightened to none of them as they had brightened to the cottage on the edge of Mascall's Wood.

"That is the place I want."

He was very definite about it, and so well able to persuade his mother that there was some mysterious and healing life to be lived on Burnt Heath, that Bartholomew—buttressed between his wife and his two sons—prepared to draw a cheque on the future and to hope that he would be left in peace to win golf balls off old Lambrick.

"We'll do the thing well."

Messrs. Groob and Giddy were asking twelve thousand pounds for the property. This "rockbottom price" included Ottways, let on a repairing lease to Colonel Copredy at £150 a year, the two farms, Lydiards and Romans, the Rising Sun Inn, several cottages, Mascall's Wood and about fifty acres of heath. Bartholomew sent a surveyor down to go over the buildings, and his report was very favourable, but he took exception to the cottage by Mascall's Wood. This came near wrecking the scheme, until John won over his mother by telling her that he meant to camp out for most of the year, and that he would have the cottage repaired.

But before a final decision was taken Rollin Beal held a very unusual consultation at his house in Wimpole Street. John was not present; in fact, he knew nothing about this family council, and he might have felt restive and uncomfortable had he been there. Bartholomew and his wife, Carlyon and Reginald sat round Beal's table and discussed the scheme in all its details. Car and his mother did most of the talking; Lavinia had made a secret excursion to Kingsbury; she had not seen Miss Copredy, but she had discovered a glamour of her own, the glamour of the mysterious and the sentimental.

“It is such sweet country, even in winter, and of course, in time, John will have Ottways.”

She had mapped it all out. She saw her favourite son living the life of a country gentleman, with that mind-scar wiped out, and a wife and children completing the picture. Lavinia hankered after grandchildren; she felt that she would be able to enjoy them without feeling in any way responsible; and Car was not married and Reginald’s wife did not want children. The fact was she did not want Reginald’s children, and Reginald’s brothers did not blame her.

At this family conference the three thousand a year man sat bald and bored, ostentatiously sceptical. He had had a passage of arms with Car and with his mother. This mad-hatter scheme! Did Bartholomew intend to settle the capital on John? Yes, Bartholomew did intend. Reginald looked contemptuous.

“Does not anyone realize that John cannot be credited with stability? In six months he will be clamouring for some other toy.”

His mother flared with startling unexpectedness.

“You won’t try to do him justice, you with all your success and your career. John is utterly in earnest. Why, he is even learning to cook.”

Reginald laughed. His laughter was rare and it did not suit him.

“I suppose he wears an apron! Am I to take this as evidence of his sanity?”

Car, who was saying something to Beal, turned on Reginald with one of his quick flashes.

“We are not here to break eggs in a hat.”

This fierceness put Reginald upon his dignity.

“I wish to dissociate myself——”

“Thank God,” said Car.

Beal took the tangled threads into his hands and gently pulled them straight. He had certain questions to ask Carlyon Stretton. Who would be John’s nearest neighbours; what sort of people were they? Car described old Viner, painting a pleasant picture of him, but he said nothing of the girl at Ottways, though some of her colour crept into portraiture of Thomas Viner and into his impression of the landscape. Mrs. Stretton nodded and smiled at

Car Bartholomew, sitting judicially with his hands on his stomach, felt that that family would persuade him to sign that cheque.

He was quite ready to sign it. He could go to the club and say with casual impressiveness: "I have bought that poor lad of mine a little place in the country. A few hundred acres, you know. Rollin Beal's advice. Wonderful man—Rollin Beal." And even old Lambrick would be sympathetic. They would say that Bartholomew Stretton was a warm man, a generous man. He could put down his thousands to give a broken boy his chance. Yes, a very sad case young Stretton's; of course, the law was an ass, but what could you do with a man who was liable to beat out the brains of some respectable citizen? Cage him or put him somewhere where he was likely to come to no harm? A very excellent arrangement.

The party broke up, Bartholomew and his wife driving off to Esher, and Reginald returning to his Kensington flat where he could relieve himself by being portentously unpleasant to his wife. Car remained behind with Rollin Beal; they had need of each other.

"Doctor, what do you think the chances are? I mean, is that life down there going to cure him?"

Parker had brought in tea, and Beal was filling Carlyon's cup.

"I don't know. No one knows. But we are giving him his most likely chance. Help yourself, will you?"

When Car looked serious he grew more like his younger brother, and he was very serious now.

"Are you sure that it is his best chance?"

"Can you suggest any alternative?"

"No, I can't. All I know is that Jack is passionately keen on the life, and that it would drive me to drink or an intrigue in ten days."

"Men differ. There's a platitude for you. And I think I can tell you how you differ from John."

"I am listening."

"You want to impress yourself on people; he prefers to make his impression on things."

Car's eyes lit up.

"That means that I have more vanity?"

"No, more ambition."

"Quite true. And you are saying what Jack said in much the same words. By the way, has it occurred to you to wonder whether he is interested in women?"

"Oh, yes," said Beal; "but I don't think he is. Is that your impression?"

"I don't think he cares a tinker's cuss about them just at present," said Car, munching buttered toast; "but I suppose it will happen. What then?"

"It may depend on the woman," said Beal.

"You mean that it ought to be a particular sort of woman?"

"Yes. Say one with a happy, comely temperament."

"That's rather a one in a hundred chance, Beal. You see, I have no more illusions about women than I have about men. We are patchwork."

"Yes, until something happens," said Beal, smiling his luminous smile, "and then the gold threads show."

But he had other work for John's brother. He told Car that he wished him to go down to Kingsbury and interview one of the local doctors, a man named Mellor.

"I knew Mellor well at the hospital. I have had cases from him. He is a sound man, mainly because he has not yet got bored with his work. I shall write to him and explain your brother's case."

"Then what am I to do?"

"Go into it with Mellor. I want him to hold what we might call a 'watching brief.' Of course, your brother must not know."

"I think I could manage it this week-end. Your idea is to have someone more or less on the spot who understands the situation?"

"Exactly. He knows the neighbourhood. He might be able to help Jack to know the people he ought to know, and to avoid those——"

Car gave Beal a shrewd look.

"Do you really think that personality is of such importance?"

"It may seem strange to you, but I do. I believe it to be the most important factor in this case. How much illness or wellness is there in other people's souls!"

“Yes, I suppose that’s true,” said Car; “Reginald always gives me a liver. And Jack is sensitive. I rather liked the people at the farm, the Viners; homely folk, you know, looked as though they had grown there.”

“Simple without being stupid, and kindly?”

“Yes, much like that. Of course, I only saw them for a few minutes, but that is the impression I had.”

Car went off to his club, pondering this subtle subject and wondering whether Beal’s psychology was not a little too clever and esoterical. It seemed to him to suggest the labelling of people like medicine bottles. “Two tablespoonfuls of Mr. Viner to be taken three times a day after meals,” or, “one dose of Miss Isobel Copredy an hour before bedtime!” Yes, and he had not even mentioned Miss Copredy of Ottways. The idea was absurd. What harm could it do John to have an occasional glimpse of a red head and an apple-green jumper? Beal’s theory postulated too great a complexity.

Meanwhile, Bartholomew and his wife, posting back to Esher, discussed another aspect of John’s future, an aspect that was definitely feminine. It was old Stretton who raised the point. He did not like the idea of John living all alone in that cottage; his own sociability recoiled from such a prospect and foresaw incipient melancholia. Moreover, who was going to cook and clean and wash and make beds? Men are such helpless mortals.

“I think Madge ought to live with him for the first six months. I suppose they could get a woman to come in and do the work.”

He was astonished to find that his wife did not agree with him, and when he pressed her for her reasons she gave them with what was for her unusual bluntness.

“Madge would not go.”

“But it is her duty to go.”

“I don’t think John would want her.”

“But he must have somebody there. Why not an ex-service man? Anyhow, I shall put it to Madge.”

He did so, and was met with the bluntest of blunt refusals. She, too, had her reasons and very good reasons.

“John and I don’t agree. We should quarrel in a week.”

“The fact is you don’t want to go,” said her father rather testily, “you modern young women——”

“We say what we think, pater. It saves such a lot of trouble. Ask John; if he is honest as I am he will tell you that he would not have me at any price.”

“In my young days——” said her father.

“You expected women to be genteel housemaids. Ask John.”

Bartholomew took her at her word, and going in search of John, found him in the library reading a book on the keeping of bees. His father took the hearthrug, and assuming the “my dear boy” attitude, asked his son to explain how he proposed to live in that hypothetical cottage. John, plucked away from the hiving of imaginary bees, looked straight at his father, keeping his forefinger in the book to mark his place.

“I can look after myself all right.”

“What, cook and wash up the dishes and make your own bed?”

“Men do it in the colonies.”

“Yes, yes, I know, and do you think they like it? I have suggested to Madge that she should come and keep house for you.”

John was less abrupt than his sister, but he made it perfectly plain that he did not want Madge.

“I’m sorry, pater, but we should bore each other to death. I would much rather be alone.”

Bartholomew gave a shrug of the shoulders.

“Well, well; you young people are different from what we were. But what on earth are you going to do down there?”

John accepted the question in all seriousness.

“I shall have to run the cottage. I mean to develop the place, enlarge the garden, take in another field and plant fruit trees. I want to expand it gradually into a small intensive farm. I shall have a lot to learn.”

“Yes, yes,” said his father, “I see all that, but what about live things, friends? A man can’t live with vegetables and—and dish-cloths.”

John laughed, but there was no mockery in his laughter. His father’s point was thoroughly sound.

“Oh, there are the people at the farms. Besides, I shall have dogs, and bees, and a cat, and some livestock later on. Plenty to keep me busy.”

Bartholomew gave it up.

“I’m thinking of you—your happiness, John,” he said.

His son got up and stood very close to him.

“Dear old pater, you have been very generous to me. Don’t—don’t worry. I shall make good.”

VIII

THOMAS VINER AND MISS ISOBEL COPREDY

Of Carlyon Stretton's second visit to Kingsbury something must be recorded. He arrived on the Saturday afternoon and put up at The Moon, balancing the stertorous waiter with his black thumbnail and the tarnished spoons against the pretty chambermaid who handed out the candles. Car had tea and then went in search of Dr. Mellor. The doctor's red brick house stood back from the cobbles of King Street behind a low wall and a laurel hedge, and Car found Mellor just returned from a long afternoon round.

He was a big man, blond, blue-eyed and quiet. He took Car into his den. He said at once that he had heard from Rollin Beal, and that Beal had sent him a complete history of John Stretton's case, and that it had interested him intensely.

"The war has given us plenty of problems. Your brother is not down here with you?"

"No. This visit of mine is unofficial. Beal wanted me to have a talk with you."

Mellor passed him his cigarette-case, and asked Car if he would mind him having his tea brought in.

"I'm more than busy. You say that you have had tea?"

"Yes, thanks; but have yours."

Car liked the man. He reminded him of a big, blue-eyed dog who would ward off little quarrelsome people with an imperturbable and good-natured shoulder, and who was so happy a friend with himself that he made sick folk feel better for seeing him. He was full of robust vitality. He gave the impression that he was never in a hurry, and never petulant, never sour or cynical. "Just like a nice yellow plum," thought Car, "full of healthy, human juice."

The talk between them grew very intimate and frank. It centered at last upon Beal's theory of the interactions of differing personalities, the people who are good for us and the people who are bad. Mellor was ready to agree

with Beal, partly because he had such faith in the great alienist, but also because he realized that a large part of life's emotion is a matter of personal suggestion. He took up the thread of the idea and followed it to Burnt Heath. He knew the neighbourhood well, and the people. There were the Viners.

"Beal would call them beneficent, I suppose," said Car.

"I don't think your brother could have better neighbours. The girl is away at present, helping a married sister."

"Oh, so there is a daughter! You know, it is my idea, doctor, that if this experiment breaks down it will be because of a woman."

"Or the lack of one."

"Exactly. I take it that my brother ought not to marry, at least not until there has been no recurrence. By the way, what about the people at Ottways?"

"Old Copredy? I don't think there is any harm in old Copredy."

Mellor's eyes smiled. He had once had a most volcanic row with Colonel Copredy, and it had produced mutual tolerance and respect.

"And the daughter? There is a daughter."

"Oh, yes, there is a daughter" and it was obvious to Car that Mellor regarded her more seriously than he did her father; "a very modern young woman."

Car, being a busy man, understood the ways of a busy man, and when Mellor rose and glanced at the clock, Car thanked him and prepared to go. Mellor went with him to the door, and they stood there chatting for half a minute.

"I may take it as a certainty—I mean, your brother settling up there?"

"We have agreed to buy. Jack may be down here any day."

Then Mellor made a suggestion.

"Why not go and see old Viner and take him into your confidence? You need not tell him everything. For instance, you can explain that your brother was shell-shocked, and that he is still a bit nervy and has to live a quiet, open-air life. Old Viner is a very decent old fellow, and no fool."

"That's an idea. I think I shall act on it, doctor."

"I should. I can't see that it can do any harm."

"No, nor can I. Thanks ever so much. Good night."

Carlyon thought so well of the suggestion that he chartered the Ford car next day and was driven over to Burnt Heath. It was a clear, frosty morning, with crackle ice in the ruts and puddles, the grass silvered with hoar frost, and the hedges all rime. Willowmaston, red among the blackness of its winter trees, throbbed to its church bell, and sent smoke straight from its chimneys into the pale sunlight. When passing Ottways Mellor's suggestion suddenly enlarged itself in Car's mind. What was to prevent him calling on Colonel Copredy and challenging that gallant gentleman's sympathy? It could be done. Car had very good manners, and a quick way of winning people. Also, he might get a second glimpse of Colonel Copredy's daughter!

Car caught Mr. Viner sitting in front of the fire, his slippers on his feet, and a pair of highly polished black boots warming by the fender. Mrs. Mary had gone to Hadworth church, and her man had promised to walk down and meet her; meanwhile he smoked his pipe and read one of the most unexpected of books, Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire." He made room for his visitor by the fire and offered him his tobacco-jar. There was no fluster about him, for Thomas Viner was a very great gentleman.

"It is a shame to trouble you on a Sunday morning."

Viner waited quietly to hear what the trouble was.

"Oh, it is nothing about your farm, Mr. Viner. We are buying the property for my brother. The fact is, I want to talk to you about my brother; I think you can help us."

Car explained the position. He put it to Thomas Viner that John Stretton had been shell-shocked, that he was not quite fit for the strenuous life of the day, hence Burnt Heath and the cottage by Mascall's Wood. He described his brother's enthusiasm for a solitary, country life, for the game of camping out and tending his own hearth fire.

"The trouble is," said Car, "that I don't think he knows the difference between a potato and a turnip. There is plenty of enthusiasm. It occurred to me that you might father him a bit. He is one of the very best, and as straight as you make them."

Car watched the farmer's face. He was an expert at dealing with men, men who were secretive or suspicious or out to drive a politely brutal bargain. He watched a man's eyes, and old Viner's eyes remained exactly what they always were.

"It will be rather lonely for the lad," he said.

Car blessed him.

“That is what we feel. He has got to plough his own furrow, but if there is a friendly soul on the other side of the hedge——”

“Ay,” said the farmer, “that’s so. He can drop in here just when he likes. We are quiet folk.”

His blue eyes gave a twinkle of kindness, and he reached for his boots.

“Supposing we take a walk up and have a look at the place?”

Here was a man after Car’s own heart.

“Would you? Why, that’s excellent. I am as green as grass in the country.”

They went up together to Mascall’s Wood. Car had the key of the cottage, but old Viner had the key of far more important things. He plodded about in his quiet, dreamy way, yet his dreaminess was thoroughly practical. It was the mood of the man who knew Nature from root to crown. The land was part of his consciousness; he felt it, divined it. He went at once to the pith of things. If it were Mr. Stretton’s idea to grow fruit and to keep livestock, he would need more land and more buildings, and the right sort of land.

“Where are we to get it?” asked Car.

Old Viner stroked his moustache.

“You see that field of mine down there? I might manage to let him have two or three acres of it, just under the wood where there is shelter.”

“You think you could?”

“Ay,” said the man of few words. “I have enough for my beasts.”

Car’s face showed one of its quick, vital flushes.

“Mr. Viner, you are a man after my own heart. I can assure you we shall be generous.”

Old Viner’s eyes lit up.

“I lost a lad in the war. I don’t think we forget quite so quickly as they do in the towns.”

Car took his midday dinner at Romans Farm, and divining the fact that Mr. Viner indulged in an afternoon nap on the Sabbath—he looked like it—Car, after a short talk with Mrs. Mary, went upon his way. Realizing that it

would be a most unseemly and unpropitious hour at which to call upon the Copredys, for it was more than probable that Colonel Copredy fell asleep after reading the *Observer*, he made a circuit of Burnt Heath and explored some of the surrounding villages. It was nearly four o'clock when the Ford pulled up outside the gate of Ottways and Car walked up the avenue of limes to make trial of the Copredy temper.

He pictured the colonel as a peppery man, a conventional figure, perhaps because he was thinking of the high colour of the daughter, and it was the daughter whom he met. Old Copredy had gone to bed with lumbago. The white front door opened when Car was half-way up the drive, and Car found the girl walking towards him. She was wearing a moleskin coat and a fur toque, and the cold weather seemed to have brightened her colour. Car, the enthusiastic appreciator of smart women and as good a judge of dress as any man to be met in a Pall Mall club, saw that she was no country cousin. She had style, or "devil," as he preferred to call it.

"I beg your pardon."

Car had a very charming "attack." He smiled. He had a pleasant voice, a manner that was as right and as unostentatious as his clothes.

"I beg your pardon; are you Miss Copredy?"

She looked him full in the face, and that glance of hers was something of a shock to Car. He had seen that look before, had had it thrust at him in the half light of London streets, but it was unexpected under the lime trees of Ottways. It reminded him, too, of the war, and of the effect the war had had upon certain women.

"Yes."

Her voice was vibrant and rather hard.

"I was coming to call on your father."

"Colonel Copredy is in bed. I am going down to send our gardener to Kingsbury for the doctor."

"I'm sorry," said Car, "but I am driving back to Kingsbury. Can I take a message? I hope it is nothing serious?"

He noticed that her face never seemed to change. It remained like a bright and rather hard day in summer, without the subtler softnesses and the evanescent shadows. Her eyes grew a little more attentive or mischievous, that was all.

“Thanks. It’s good of you. If you could leave a message with Dr. Mellor; he lives in King Street. Say Colonel Copredy has lumbago.”

She gave a slight laugh, as though lumbago was a ridiculous complaint, and particularly ridiculous when it showed itself in her father. Car could imagine him walking about with extreme care, stiff as a poker, and ready to snap at anybody and everything—if it could be done without hurting his back.

“I will leave a message with pleasure. By the way, my name is Stretton. My brother will be your landlord.”

He smiled.

“Oh,” she said, “I see. But if you had any idea of seeing my father on business, I should advise you——”

“Oh, not business,” he said. “Nothing of that kind. I should not think of bothering Colonel Copredy.”

She answered his smile.

“No, he is not very terrible. What I mean is, he is so useless, so sorry for himself.”

And then she encountered a sudden and vague hostility in Car’s eyes, the hostility of the clannish male. She was piqued by it, for like many of the moderns she had adopted the Bernard Shaw idea of turning any accepted convention upside down and asserting that that was its proper and honest position. It was conventional to be kissed by a man, but if he disliked you the provocation was doubled.

Car made a polite movement towards the gate.

“I will deliver your message. Charming man, Mellor. I know him slightly.”

She walked with him towards the gate.

“Didn’t I see you and your brother in a car outside here one day?”

“I believe you did.”

She did not ask him any more direct questions, but she did say that the shooting was quite good and that there was a trout stream within twenty miles, but Car was not to be drawn. He knew that she was wondering why he had wished to see her father, but Car had readjusted his attitude towards

Ottways and Miss Isobel Copredy. He smiled as he closed the gate and raised his hat.

"Good afternoon. I will leave that message with Dr. Mellor."

"Awfully good of you," she said, giving him the full stare of what the halfpenny Press would have called her "compelling eyes."

Car looked as though he were feeling the cold.

"No bon for the troops," he thought. "I should like to put Ottways out of bounds."

IX

JOHN STRETTON MAKES HIS BED

WHEN STRETTON woke on that February morning his bedroom window was still full of the night.

He was conscious of a feeling of excitement, of a sense of adventure, and reaching out for the candlestick on the chair beside the bed he struck a match, lit the candle, and glanced at his wrist watch. Ten minutes past five! He put the watch back, blew out the candle, and lay and waited for the window frame to change from black to grey, for the Moon at Kingsbury afforded no scope for the spirit of adventure at five o'clock on a February morning. He was content to lie there for a while in the little narrow room in the midst of a great silence, for on this day he was to begin the life of his own choosing, and the bedroom had some of the atmosphere of a monk's cell. Car had wondered whether this younger brother of his had not forgotten to stress the problem of his own manhood. Suffering brings reticence, especially suffering which is suppressed, and an Englishman's attitude towards the sex in himself may be full of an essential modesty which had been miscalled hypocrisy by people who think with the French. Stretton had a very good grasp of his own case. He had not shirked the facing of his own future, even in its relations to sex. He took the view that he had a moral skeleton in his cupboard, and that until he had buried that skeleton somewhere on Burnt Heath he had no right to marry. His appreciation of sex ended in the idea of marriage. The conventionalist may regard marriage as a refuge; the idealist regards it as something mysterious and right and beautiful, and Stretton was an idealist.

This attitude of restraint was behind all his actions, though he was not actively conscious of it during the earlier phases of the adventure. For the moment he was intensely interested in things and not in people. He lay in bed till the dawn came and showed him the spire of Kingsbury Church as a black obelisk against the pale gold of a winter sky. The day promised well, and he got up and dressed, and so keen was he to begin the day that he did not wait for hot water but washed and shaved in cold. Going downstairs he passed Car's pretty chambermaid, and seemed hardly aware of her.

"I was bringing your hot water, sir."

Stretton gave a vague glance at the can in her hand.

"Oh, that's all right. You need not bother."

Half a minute later he was out in the Moon's yard, looking at the black and yellow motor-van that had arrived the night before with all the gear and furniture of his cottage, a present from his mother. A man was bending over one of the wings, pouring oil into the oil-sump.

"You will be ready to start soon after breakfast?"

"Any time you like, sir."

He gave a momentary glance at Stretton.

"You won't be able to get your van up to the cottage. I am hiring a cart from the nearest farm, and we shall have to transfer the stuff. How many of you are there?"

"Me and two mates."

"The four of us should manage. I am driving up in a hired car, and I can show you the way. I have some shopping to do first. Supposing we say half-past nine?"

"Very good, sir."

Stretton strolled out into the town. He was in a very happy mood, and Kingsbury humoured it on this clear February morning. He felt the town; he was aware of its quiet breathing that had gone on for centuries; it smelt of the country even in this machine-made age; it was a town in which cattle were bought and sold, and to which country folk came with their carts and wagons. Stretton may have been guilty of conscious selection, and of seeing the things he wished to see. To him the country spoke of romance, and romance that spilled itself even into certain shops where you bought seeds or flour or tools or harness and farming tackle. A garage with a new tractor exhibited in the window interested Stretton not at all, for he had not the machine mind. He loitered outside a wheelwright's yard, or looked at the cattle-pens in the market-place, and spent two minutes outside an ironmonger's window.

At half-past nine the convoy started for Burnt Heath, and at the gate of Romans Farm old Viner met them.

"Ay, you are a bit early. My carter will be here in five minutes."

He shook hands with Stretton, and then remembered to tell him that he had had a couple of sacks of coal sent up to the cottage.

"You forgot it, you know."

Stretton laughed and thanked him. He had made an arrangement with the Viners for the supply of milk, eggs and butter, and Mary Viner had promised to take in his meat, bread and groceries from the Hadworth shops and send them up daily by the farm boy. Mrs. Mary had been troubled about his cooking, refusing to believe that a lone man, and a townsman at that, could produce anything that was eatable. She foresaw a diet of boiled eggs, bacon, tinned meat and cake, and a great and healthy loathing at the end of it, and it was here that she imagined the advent of the inevitable woman. She was right and she was wrong. History does not tell us how St. Anthony dealt with his frying pans—if he had such articles—but Mrs. Viner did not know John Stretton or realize that he would be as obstinate as the saint.

She sent out a message by Sam Rugglesworth, the carter's boy.

"Dinner's at 'alf-past twelve, mister."

Stretton, busy at the tail of the motor-van, helping the men out with an oak chest that was full of books, turned a flushed face.

"Is that for me, boy?"

"Sure."

"Thank Mrs. Viner and tell her I shall be glad to come."

Meanwhile he was happy and absorbed in the great game of making a home. The Cottage—he had given it that, the name of simplicity—had been in the hands of Mr. Rumble of Willowmaston, who had torn out the rusty and toothless old grates, fitted a compact little "kitchener," a bath and a new sink, splashed distemper everywhere, rose or buff, painted all the woodwork white, renewed the thatch, and fitted a new gate and a new well flap. Regretfully Stretton had seen the winch and bucket go, and a wheel pump under a penthouse had taken its place, whence he could pump his water to a tank in the roof. The garden gate had ceased to hang awry and to plough a groove in the path. It stood up straight and true, its blue slats blinking at the horizon.

Stretton and his merry men were at work till three o'clock, and at that hour he was rid of them with sundry tips and a feeling of relief. They had broken one of the legs of his gate-legged table, got themselves jammed in the narrow staircase with the top of a "tallboy," and worried themselves free with some damage to the plaster. They went, hauling up at the Rising Sun for various drinks, while Stretton lit his fire for the first time and put the kettle on to boil for tea.

The place was full of packing cases, but he postponed the unpacking of them till after dusk, being lured forth by the westering sun, and the first consciousness of the landscape as his. Neither the kitchen window nor the bedroom window above, sunk deep in its saddle of thatch, showed him all that he desired to see, and he went and stood at the blue gate and looked at the vista which was to be his from day to day. From the very first he had realized its beauty, though why its beauty pleased him so much he could not say. The ground stretched level for a little distance, brown with dead bracken or green with grass and furze. Spaced here and there were old yews, thorns and birches, shutting out the too-large horizon and giving a feeling of shelter and of secrecy; but at one point there was a gap, a grey-blue glimpse of infinity, full of the atmosphere of far hills. The ground fell away gently, and in the middle distance the trees and red roofs of Romans Farm showed in the soft light.

"Yes, I don't mind that farm."

He realized that he would be able to see a blink of light from the homestead when darkness fell, and the idea pleased him.

"Like a friendly ship," he thought.

He turned about and looked at his cottage and its woodlands. There was no one line in his cottage that could be called straight; the thatched roof undulated; the timber and brick walls showed vague bulgings; the chimney stack leant slightly away from the south-west wind. Its queer, tumbledown beauty, for beauty it had, lay in its irregularity, its kinship with its setting. It was not a question of sentimentality, of a once new and ugly thing mellowed by the passing of time. It seemed to Stretton that the old folk had known how to build to their surroundings, unconsciously, perhaps, or because they had more individuality, and also more simplicity. The educated utilitarian sets up his cube of red bricks, or if he is pretentious his spotted and smirking little villa.

"Queer," thought Stretton as he stood at the gate; "most people are ugly and live in ugly houses. And yet we are not blind."

From the cottage he turned his eyes to the wood. The cottage stood at the end of a cleft which had the appearance of an old road or ride, and the woodland differed on either side of this line. On the west it was composed of Scotch fir, spruce, larch and Douglas fir; on the east it was chiefly deciduous, oak, beech, birch, with a scattering of old yews and hollies, and a few tall cypresses towering between the branches. These cypresses had no right to a place in an English wood, and yet the man who had planted them

there had planted better than he knew. None of the trees was of very great age, and in more than one spot the oaks and beeches had never been cut over, and had run up in crowded pillars to meet in the canopy above. This crowding of the ash-grey and grey-green trunks had a very definite charm. It reminded Stretton of some of the woods which he had seen in France. He could picture it all in the spring, with all its many shades of glimmering green, while the cuckoo called, and the bluebells flowered among the dead leaves and the rusty bracken. He imagined it as a sanctuary for many birds, even that gaillard and raucous thief the jay. He would see the flicker of the sunlight and the shadows, the gold-dappled trunks and the patterning of light upon the brown-green carpet. It was mysterious, complete and good.

Presently he remembered his kettle. He had turned away from the gate, and was looking at the red ball of the sun hanging in the thick of an old thorn tree when he heard a scuffling in the hedge and the quick and excited breathing of a dog. The sound was unexpected, and he opened the gate and stepped out beyond the line of the hedge, but there was no dog there. He returned to the garden in time to see the black head of a spaniel pushing through the long grass. The dog caught sight of him and stood at gaze.

"Hallo, old fellow!"

Stretton's voice was "Hail fellow, well met" to the intruder. The dog came trotting up with all the affectionate enthusiasm and the tail and body waggings of a spaniel, ready to be caressed and to answer the caresses with an active tongue.

"Well, where do you come from? Not a bad hint to me either, old chap."

It was then that he heard the voice of the dog's companion, and realized the nearness of someone else.

"Prince, Prince!"

The dog showed no desire to leave Stretton.

"Prince!"

"Go along, old thing."

He walked to the gate and opened it suggestively.

"Now then."

Almost instantly he was conscious of another presence. It came to him over the heath and along the silver-grey line of the old oak palings of the fence around the wood. He saw the figure as a blur of colour, something

more vividly green than the furze and the grass, and then it moved between him and the red circle of the setting sun, becoming a black silhouette, the figure of a woman.

He stared. The presence of the woman was far more unexpected than that of the dog, and perhaps less welcome. She came on. She passed out of the sun's circle, and the colour of her returned. She dropped her mystery, and became a girl with red hair, swinging a stick, sleek in her apple green.

"I'm afraid my dog has been trespassing."

She paused by the gate, and Stretton was aware of her modernity. She had the flat, breastless figure and the rather stooping carriage and the narrow hips of the particularly modern type, but if the feminine outline changes, the sex may appear the same. Her skin was radiant, the colouring rich yet hard. Her nostrils were too deeply cut, and cruel in contrast to her sensuous mouth. Her blue eyes looked at Stretton with an expression that might have been described as boldly frank. That there was much behind this frankness was more a matter of intuition, for John Stretton divined more things than he knew.

"Anyhow, your dog has given me a suggestion," he said, drawing back behind the gate.

The act may have seemed to her defensive. The man in him did not like her. She realized that with the quickness of an egotistical child.

"You want a dog up here."

She prodded the ground with her stick, and having looked at her face he kept his eyes on her brown brogues and her dark green stockings. He felt that she wanted him to explain himself, and he had not the slightest intention of explaining himself to her.

"Yes, for company, you know. A dog does not ask questions."

It slipped out before he realized what the words implied. Her eyelids gave a little flicker. She was provoked by opposites more than by sympathies.

"The cheapest form of conversation! Well, I should suggest an Airedale —something not too sentimental."

She smiled, nodded, but still loitered, looking at the cottage. There was interest in her eyes and some malice. She thought of telling him what had happened to the last dweller in the cottage, but she refrained, yet not out of kindness. That is what youth lacks—kindness.

Stretton closed the gate.

"Excuse me, I have forgotten my kettle. It must have boiled itself to death."

She went off laughing, but he had a feeling that her laughter mocked everything that was his, both in this world and the hypothetical next. She was destructive; he might have said that she had been born of the war. As for the kettle, he found it boiling its heart out, with chattering lid, and a label of steam bulging from its spout.

"What an unpleasant young woman!"

That was his impression; but he had forgotten all about her by the time that he had lit a pipe and washed up the tea things. He had too much to do, too much that was urgent and interesting. He had to unpack his cases and make his bed with those carefully aired sheets and blankets sent down from Stow House in a steamer trunk. He smiled, but very kindly, over his mother's forethought.

"As though I had never seen the inside of a dug-out," he reflected.

By nine o'clock he had got things fairly shipshape, and was sitting by the fire listening to the wind in the trees. His trees! Life and his tobacco tasted good.

But Isobel Copredy's mood was one of laughter all the way home to Ottways. She was amused as only a very sophisticated young woman can be amused. That Stretton belonged to a type that appealed to her was neither here nor there. She knew very little about him save that he was a man of some property and an ex-officer, and that he had an elder brother who was very much a man of the world. Her ignorance did not prevent her from inferring that a man who had been pushed down here to lead so eccentric a life must have some eccentricity to justify it. It was possible that he had been crocked in the war, or had got into trouble after it, and she thought the latter explanation more probable and more interesting.

The sun had set when she reached Ottways. She left the spaniel in the stable, and entered the house by the side door opening into the passage where the deckchairs, golf clubs and croquet mallets were kept. Croquet was Colonel Copredy's game; his daughter left it at that. The passage led her to the staircase end of the big square hall with oak chests and an old oak cupboard into which it was possible to throw gloves, paper, string and books, and so rid oneself of further responsibility. Her first movement was

towards the walnut table where letters were left. There were no letters. Her thrusting of the stick into the stand suggested annoyance.

"Rose."

A maid was crossing the hall with a silver teapot and a dish of hot toast on a tray.

"Yes, miss."

"Why haven't you lit the lamp?"

"I was just going to light it. The colonel is waiting, miss."

Isobel went in to her father. He was a fussy little man with a sharp, beaked nose, very red about the cheekbones; a man whose neck always looked too small for his collar. He wore grey slippers, which was an offence, and as he sat in his big chair he had poised his feet on a footstool so that they somewhat resembled a couple of harmless, furry animals happily perched in front of the fire.

"Ha, tea!"

He found relief in hailing the obvious, but he withdrew his feet from their perch by the fire and tucked them very close to his chair. It was to be inferred that Colonel Copredy was afraid of his daughter.

"Had a good walk?"

She sat down in the other chair with an air of boredom.

"Perfectly splendid!"

The maid brought in the lamp, and Isobel began to pour out tea. She had filled one cup when she saw something white tucked away between her father's Norfolk jacket and the padded arm of his chair. Her hand remained poised over the sugar bowl, and Colonel Copredy looked uncomfortable.

"Letters?"

He suddenly remembered that there were letters, and he handed over two to her. She accepted them without a word, glanced at the envelopes, laid them in her lap, and took the lid off the toast dish. A moment later she had opened one of the letters and sat reading it. Her blue eyes grew harder, and a little angry crease showed between her eyebrows. When she had finished the letter she tore it up, and, leaning forward, threw the pieces into the fire.

Old Copredy looked at her a little anxiously, but she took no notice of him, finishing her tea in silence and with an air of fierce detachment. Her

father picked up the magazine that he had been reading and tried to forget the young woman on the other side of the table. “I wish to heaven she would marry” was old Copredy’s sincere and almost daily prayer, but his daughter’s estimate of the blessed state of matrimony was not that of the Victorians.

She was angry, unpleasantly angry, and when she left him her father gave a little heave of relief and allowed his slippers to creep out and warm themselves at the fire.

“Something in that letter, I suppose,” he reflected. “I can’t make the girl out.”

Isobel had gone to her room, and it was very much her own room in colour and in temper. She had had it refurnished a year ago in electrical zigzags and jagged spasms of colour. The carpet was a grass-green pile, the walls old gold, the upholstery and curtains purple, the furniture modern red lacquer. There were huge wadded cushions in front of the fireplace. On the mantelpiece and the table were trophies, such as the fragment of a German bomb which had embedded itself in the body of the ambulance which Isobel Copredy had driven in France. The room was full of photos, mostly of men in uniform. One particular portrait in a red lacquer frame stood in the centre of the mantelpiece. An eggshaped face with stupid and self-assertive eyes and a little black moustache looked out of the frame. The thing was signed in a heavy, ornate scrawl “Tabbs.”

Isobel Copredy went straight to this portrait. She took it in both hands and doubled the frame upon itself, for she was very strong.

“My dear,” she said, “I always knew you were a cad, but I did not think you were a silly cad. Good-bye!”

And she threw the thing into the fire.

X

LIFE

STRETTON'S mood was one of quiet enthusiasm.

He was old enough to know that there would be times when he might expect to feel restless and lonely, but when neither loneliness nor disquietude attacked him he was conscious of interested surprise.

In the first place this simple life which he had chosen was full of hard work. Also he had a philosophy of his own, and a right view of things. He got up at daylight, and, going down into the old kitchen with its brown beams and brick floor, he lit his fire and made himself an early cup of tea. The cottage was cold on these February and March mornings, but young blood should not feel the cold, and Stretton did not feel it. His boiler gave him a hot bath at eight. He breakfasted anywhere between half-past eight and nine, lit a pipe, washed up and was ready for the day's work.

He had come to regard work as the true worker's inward food and the mob's discipline. Most men are indolent; he had learnt that in the army, and the curse of Adam lay heavy on their souls; yet he had seen the most inveterate slinker change into a creature of crude and bounding energy when a piece of leather was to be kicked about a field. "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." Yes, certainly, but the modern inclination to reverse the text makes for a still more fatuous dulness. But following the question of work, and work that might be made so interesting that it becomes play, led him full face against modern civilization and its industrial god, and there, like most men, he felt helpless.

"Well, I suppose it won't last for ever. We shall regain control of the machine."

But his view of work was a sound one. He discussed it one Sunday with Thomas Viner in a tramp round old Viner's fields. The farmer was kind to his beasts and just to his men; he had matured before the modern sentimental cult of the child and the worker.

"Mr. Stretton," said he, "when I was a younker my old father said to me: 'Now, my lad, what are you going to do for a living?' Just that. Now it seems to me it's the other way round."

"How am I going to have a good time?"

“Ay, just that. What people seem to forget is that we weren’t brought into this world to have a good time. There’s a darned sight too much of the idea of having a good time. It’s the butter to the bread, no doubt, but the bread comes first.”

“The indignity of labour,” laughed Stretton.

“It’s a fact. Young wenches refusing to cook a meal and scrub floors because it’s dull, because they can’t get out to a picture-house or walk the streets every evening. Good lord, what sort of life do they have when they get married? And the lads too bright to handle a plough. It’s the dull worker that makes dull work, Mr. Stretton.”

At this point, just as they were climbing the stile into the “fourteen acre,” John asked him a question.

“Don’t you think it is all part of one thing, the revolt against the modern workshop idea, industrialism?”

Old Viner paused astride the stile, his blue eyes looking into the distance.

“I don’t know anything about industrialism, but I do know the land. If a man can’t be contented on the land—well, all I can say is there is something wrong with us.”

“Yes, if the men had the land.”

Viner got off the stile and prodded the bottom of a post with his stick to see if it was rotten.

“I’ve known farm labourers all my life, Mr. Stretton, and there’s not one in ten who would be fit to run a farm. Talking’s different from doing. Besides——”

He gave Stretton one of his quiet smiles.

“Most chaps want so much sure a week, their beer, and no bother. That’s their limit. You don’t see much of that in the papers. No, but it’s the truth.”

That he should talk to Thomas Viner on such a subject was but one of the many proofs of Stretton’s seriousness in digging himself in. He looked beyond his cottage and his bit of woodland, and his philosophy sought to plant itself on the soil where it was to grow. He felt that a man should have right views, views that could boast a certain universality. He stood for the country as against the town, for the peasant idea as against the mechanical. He believed that life could be fuller, healthier, happier in the fields than in

the streets, even though most modern men wilted to boredom away from trams and shops. He realized his own great advantages, the pride of ownership, his practical freedom from common cares, but in realizing this he felt an additional challenge, a more sensitive stimulus. Circumstances had pushed him into this particular life, and it was his business to react to them. If a man could not make money, at least he could grow things. Sweat of brain and body was a just and an elemental sweat. Self-discipline too was at the back of it as it had been at the back of the Cistercian idea. He was out to make good to himself, to block that leak in his brain, to let charity begin at home. "Dig in and get fit," that was how he expressed it, "and keep the devil of discontent on the other side of the wire."

Work he had and plenty, but he added to it a love of beauty, the one sure love in life, that and the love of one particular woman.

For company he took unto himself a black spaniel and a black cat, christening them Paul and Virginia. After one tentative quarrel in which Paul had his nose scratched, they seeded down into their respective places before John's fire, Virginia on an old footstool just clear of the draught, Paul on the rug close to Stretton's chair.

His housekeeping made him more sympathetic towards women, and appreciative of any labour-saving device or method. The one thing he loathed and always continued to loathe was washing up. He compromised with this hatred by buying a big tin bath and additional plates, cutlery and cups, and depositing the dirty ones in this bath with a dose of soda, and leaving them there until he had come to the end of his clean ware. Then he had an orgy of washing. This occurred every four days. As for his cooking, it was of the simplest, and Mary Viner helped him to solve that problem.

She came up to call and caught this man-thing in his shirt sleeves prodding a half-roasted leg of mutton with a fork, utterly puzzled to know whether it was done or not.

"Mrs. Viner, you are an absolute God-send."

She was more than that. She had liked this man from her very first glimpse of him; he appealed to her mother spirit; she had lost her one boy and the loss had left in her a deep, secret yearning. She did not trouble herself to wonder why Stretton was here living this very unusual life, knowing as she did that the cause of it was something connected with the war. Being a practical and warm-hearted woman she put her hand out to do what was obvious and necessary.

“Done? Bless me, no.”

She took off her coat and hat with a glance at him that said: “You dear innocent.” She addressed herself to the cottage range and the leg of mutton, while Stretton sat on the table and watched her with a humorous smile.

“I was going to try fried potatoes.”

“You ought not to have to do this. Where are the potatoes?”

“There, in that frying-pan.”

“I see. Now I’m thinking that you can have your joint cooked in our kitchen. The boy can bring it up.”

And Stretton, looking at her kind, broad back and ruff of white hair, consented. Mrs. Mary was not a woman with whom it was necessary to parley.

“It wastes such a lot of my time,” he explained.

“Bless you,” she smiled, “you are the first man——Well, the war was an earthquake.”

He saw her mouth and eyes sadden.

“It was,” he agreed, and then he added, “it shook me out of a groove. I was told that I had to live a quiet sort of life or go under.”

“Were you wounded?” she asked.

“Shell-shocked. Oh, I shall get over it.”

“Of course you will,” she said, “one can get over anything.”

She knew that this was not quite true, but sympathy should not shy at a high hedge.

Her eyes noticed other things, for he insisted on showing her over the cottage, and she was struck by its neatness and order; the number of books surprised her, but she saw pathos in that bath full of crockery.

“Why don’t you have a lad up to do that for you? Sam is the stupidest thing on earth, but he could wash plates.”

His answer surprised her.

“Mrs. Viner, I mean to be thorough.”

She went home pondering that remark of his understanding it and yet not understanding it. Her feeling was that it was a question of character, of a

very lovable and quaint character. He would be thorough in all that he did, in sewing on a button or in loving a woman.

If the work within was necessitous and irksome, the work in the open air had much sheer physical joy in it. Here again the Viner spirit was useful in providing this new countryman with the necessary facts. The farmer came up and smoked a pipe, heard what Stretton's ideas were, and going over the ground with him, said nothing for quite a long while, but touched things with his eyes and poked the ground with his stick. He was in no hurry. His sunburnt and sagacious head had matured its knowledge slowly, and he knew that Nature goes her own pace and that man had best keep time with her. The four-barred gate on his forehead grew slightly more marked, and his eyes seemed bluer. He told John not to hurry. "Go steady. Tackle one job at a time, and master it. Books, yes, you can learn from books, but you'll learn more by doing things for yourself and making mistakes. Get your ground dug first for your garden crops." Stretton's plan necessitated the building of a small cart-lodge and stable, a cow house and byre, a piggery, and one or two odd sheds for feeding-stuffs and tools. He told Thomas Viner that he wanted to do everything himself.

"Get section buildings. You could find a man to give you a hand with bolting them together. What about the roofing?"

Stretton wanted thatch.

"I'm not going to spoil this place. If the buildings were stained brown and worked in among the trees and thatched they would melt into the woodland."

"Ay. I can put you on to a good thatcher, but it's not cheap, and it means renewing."

"I don't mind that. Look here, Mr. Viner, if I draw out a plan will you put it right for me?"

"I will."

"My first job seems to be the garden, and fencing off the ground you are letting me have in that upper field. Isn't that so?"

"Yes, that's so. Dig the ground first, and get your crops in. You can put up the fence later. I shan't be turning any beasts into the field; it's down for hay."

So Stretton drew his plan, and took it down to Romans Farm one March evening. He and old Viner went over it before the fire, with Mrs. Viner

apportioning her interest between it and her workbasket. It was quite a good plan, and well thought out, and Tom Viner said so. Stretton had a headpiece and the gift of foreseeing things and spacing them out. He had followed the French idea of a central yard with the various buildings grouped round it.

The plan was approved. It was a farmyard in miniature, it would not expand well, but where was the land to justify expansion?

"Anyhow," said Stretton, "it will keep me busy for a good long time."

He wrote to Car asking him to recommend a firm who could supply the buildings, and then fell to with his spade. Having dealt with the cottage garden, and met the first green of the spring in the old elder tree by the back door, he attacked his new ground at the top of the field under the south-east brim of the wood. Viner had warned him that he would have to wire against rabbits, but that the wiring could be left for another month. Stretton set himself to bastard-trench a quarter of an acre, and never having done any serious digging in his life before, he went to work with such fierceness and wasted so much energy that he had no back left, or, rather, he was all back and blisters by three in the afternoon. The trenching of that ground taught him much, how to handle his tool and save himself, and the secret of going steady. He began to understand the rhythmic and seemingly otiose movements of the countryman in ploughing, digging, scything, or pitching hay. Nature sets her pace. The greater wisdom lies in discovering and following a rhythm.

He learnt to give himself ten minutes in every hour, when he would stand and lift his eyes to other things and all the beauty of them and their ever familiar strangeness. He saw the woodlands growing purple with swelling buds, a richer greenness in the grass, a deeper blue in the sky. He learnt to know the distant hills in all their varying moods. He began to study the sky and to feel the weather. He found his consciousness opening to all manner of new impressions. He saw things which he would never have seen six months ago, subtle shades of colour, changeful atmospheres, weeds, the varying texture of the trees, birds, clouds. He became aware of life, the world around him, as motion, a flowing, an expanding; even the hills seemed to breathe. Never had he realized how blind was the life of the streets. It was like consciousness being bottled and sealed up in a glass tube, cut off from all that mysterious sense of growth.

He was very happy those first two months, if to be interested is to be happy. Car and Lavinia, who paid him two surprise visits during that period,

were struck by his air of cheerful and wholesome tranquillity. And he looked most extraordinarily fit and strong.

His mother was delighted with him and with everything she saw. She had arrived with a large hamper, as though visiting a boy at school, but what delighted her most was the frank and easy way in which he talked to her. He seemed to have lost the too sharp edge of his self-consciousness.

"This is just the life for me," he told her. "Beal is a very wise man."

"Would you not like to have a box of books sent down every month, John?"

He laughed.

"Dear old mater, I am working about twelve hours a day and sleeping nine. I go to bed and sleep like the dead. When I do read I read about growing cabbages, or how to prune fruit trees, and the effect of basic slag on clover."

"My dear, you will soon be quite a farmer. I think that Ottways looks such a sweet old house."

She had her eye on Ottways, and she saw John in it with a gentle and docile wife, a wife who did not obtrude too much upon the picture, but who would give him three or four dear children.

"This old place suits me very well, mater."

"Of course, now, dear, but I always think of you as a country gentleman and a man of property."

Stretton, smiling his tranquil smile, left it at that.

To Car he was a little less communicative, perhaps because there was something in Car's eyes that puzzled him. Car looked at him as Rollin Beal had looked at him in the days when he had been more the physician than the friend.

"Got to know any of the people, Jack?"

"The Viners. They have been jolly good to me."

"What about Ottways? The colonel man ought to be knowable."

"I have never seen him," said Stretton with perfect innocence. "I don't think Ottways interests me."

It never occurred to him that he might interest Ottways, and when Colonel Copredy walked up one April afternoon and called on him, he caught Stretton weeding the brick path which led from the blue gate to the front door of the cottage. Both men were surprised. Stretton was without a collar, and wearing an old pair of army "slacks" and a blue-and-white cotton shirt. Hereward Copredy had been a dandy in his day; he was a meticulous little man in spite of his grey slippers, and he stood at the gate like a sleek and conventional robin. That this collarless young man should be his landlord seemed slightly improper. On social occasions old Copredy wore an eyeglass, and he wore it to-day; his daughter had suggested this social occasion, and even an eyeglass may focus peace.

"Excuse me, Mr. Stretton, I presume?"

He was very jerky and stiff. John pushed his basket of weeds aside with a brown boot and walked to the gate. His eyes awaited an explanation.

"I am Colonel Copredy, of Ottways. Landlord and tenant, you know, and fellow officers."

This was an immense concession, and Copredy would never have made it had he not felt very uncomfortable.

Stretton asked him in. He was quite at his ease, and when a man of Copredy's years took the trouble to walk a couple of miles to call on him the response was instinctive. He was very polite to Hereward Copredy, nor did he take any active dislike to him. They were incompatible, and there the matter might have ended, but old Copredy had been made the vehicle of a suggestion, and his acquiescence in the carrying out of the suggestion was less unselfish than it seemed. He wanted to get his daughter married, and he did not mind whom she married provided the man had a little money, and was not an absolute outsider. Isobel had inherited her mother's money, a safe three hundred a year.

"You must find life very quiet up here," said the colonel, looking round John's sitting-room for the inspiration of a golf club, a tennis racket or a gun.

"I'm kept busy, sir."

"Play any games?"

"I haven't time for games."

Copredy looked uncomfortable, and as though he wondered what the devil the chap did with himself, and Virginia, stealing in at that moment,

sprang upon his knees. He gave a little shout, and dropped his eyeglass, for he had a horror of cats.

Stretton deposited Virginia out of the window and closed the door. Copredy was readjusting his eyeglass and trying to think of something to say.

"In the war, weren't you, Mr. Stretton?"

"The ——th East Surreys."

"Ha! Territorial battalion. You must come down and dine with us some evening; no formalities, you know."

And then Stretton told Colonel Copredy the truth, though why he should have told it to this man of all men was a problem in the disentanglement of impulses.

"It is very good of you to ask me, but, you see, I'm not going anywhere. I got rather messed up in the war, and I had to side-track myself down here. I am not in a position to know anybody."

He was so frank and matter of fact about it that his visitor was reduced to helplessness. You could not pretend to sympathize with a man under such conditions, or ask him what the particular mess had been, and whether it had included a court martial. Old Copredy was a gentleman, and he dried up into a very stiff and inarticulate form of courtesy. After all, the man had been honest about it, extraordinarily frank, and without any suggestion of bitterness or defiance. He looked at Stretton's boots, made a few remarks about the country and the weather, and then got up to go.

Stretton accompanied him to the gate.

"It was good of you to walk up all this way. I hope you understand, sir, why I prefer to keep out of social affairs?"

"Oh, quite, Mr. Stretton, quite," said old Copredy, looking thoroughly ill at ease, "afraid I've——"

"Not in the least."

Stretton held the gate open for him, and Copredy walked back over the heath, feeling that Stretton was somehow a gentleman, prejudice or no prejudice.

"Funked something, I suppose," he thought, "or got in a mess over money. Of course, these 'temporaries,' one has to make allowances——"

And then he remembered a scandal of the kind happening in a regular battalion to a real soldier.

“Yes, young Sullivan. Young fool! A pity, a great pity. Well, that ought to satisfy Isobel.”

Which showed how little he knew about women, for it is sufficient to tell certain women that a particular man is a bad hat for that man to become thoroughly interesting. Of course, the interest varies with the nature of the badness and the style of the hat.

XI

SUGGESTION

ONCE a fortnight Stretton rode into Kingsbury on a second-hand bicycle which he had bought in Willowmaston village, and he was returning from one of these expeditions when he had his second meeting with Isobel Copredy. He had passed Willowmaston park and was riding slowly up the long avenue of beeches beyond it when he overtook a girl wheeling a bicycle, the back tyre of which was flat.

She turned her head as he came up, recognized him, and made a display of pausing. The invitation was natural and obvious, as obvious and as excusable as that flat tyre.

"Mr. Stretton, could you lend me a hand?"

He dismounted, never suspecting that he was making his first and imperceptible descent from the tranquillity of his simple life up yonder.

"Punctured?"

"No; I think it is only the valve, and I haven't a spare piece of tubing."

"I think I have that."

He leaned his bicycle against the trunk of a beech tree, and opened the leather tool-bag. It was very still here under the beeches whose leaves were unfolding in their first soft brilliance. The air was full of the drifting brown scales from the expanding buds, and already the avenue had that wonderful greenish light and that sense of innocent and fresh coolness. The banks beyond the trees were covered with bluebells, and the faint smell of them was unforgettable.

Stretton bent down and removed the valve while Isobel Copredy held the machine and watched him. As a man he was pleasing to her. She liked the set of his head, his brown leanness, his freckles, the crispness of his hair over the temples, the alert aloofness of his eyes. She noticed his brown hands with their long well-formed fingers.

"Yes, it's the valve."

He showed her the perished tubing, and their eyes met as she bent over the machine. It is possible that the light under the green foliage softened the

girl's over-rich colouring and the hardness of her eyes, for Stretton was not repelled as he had been repelled on that previous occasion.

"Have you a spare piece?"

"Yes."

She watched him fit the new piece of tubing, and noticed that he was very deft with his fingers.

"I'm afraid I have grown rather casual about this old machine. I expect a car next week."

"Oh, you are getting a car?" but his voice lacked interest.

"A two-seater. So useful for golf and tennis. I stay away with people a good deal, and if there is one thing I loathe it's a train."

"Yes, so anonymous."

She laughed.

"Is that a dig at me? I can take chaff. I drove an ambulance in France during the war."

He was screwing the nozzle of the pump to the valve, and he did not raise his head.

"Oh, the war," he said; "don't you want to forget about it?"

"Do you?"

She saw his neck redden, and he began to work the pump with some fierceness.

"Well, yes and no."

She knew that she had penetrated his guard.

When the business of inflating the tyre was over, Stretton raised his hat to her and mounted his machine as though he meant to ride on alone, but she was an adept at ignoring anything that she wished to ignore, and they went up the hill side by side. There were one or two stiffish gradients, but she rode up them more easily than he did. She drew her breath a little more rapidly, and her colour deepened, and there was a subtle, sexual provocation in her more hurried breathing and in her deepening colour. Stretton felt it and was vaguely distressed by it. At the top of the last rise she let her machine swerve momentarily nearer to him, and her eyes smiled.

"Nothing in it," she said, "but I think I could have beaten you."

Her frankness reassured him, for he thought it more like the frankness of a boy.

"Oh, I dare say!"

"Male complacency! Do you know that once during the war our tug-of-war team challenged a scratch lot of officers, and we beat them? Their faces!"

"Rather a shock!"

"It was."

They were nearing Ottways, and she rode along with her defiant head in the air.

"Don't you find it very lonely up in that wood?"

She put the question so suddenly that he was tricked into answering it.

"No. Why should I?"

"Oh, well, if you like it that is your affair, isn't it? But after the war—and all the jolly, sporting pals one had!"

He imagined that Colonel Copredy had told her nothing of his visit to Mascall's Wood and of the surprise he had received there.

"I keep a cat and dog," he said with a little ironical twist of the mouth.

She gave him a quick, almost intimate look.

"Poor man! Well, I get off here. Au revoir."

Stretton noticed something about her as she got off her machine and pushed open one of the iron gates, the something that a man notices without being able to help himself. The sex in her mocked him, making him aware of her as a woman, a woman who had a little swagger in her movements, a conscious provocation. "See here, my lad, I'm worth hunting." He found himself looking at her ankles, the set of her skirt, her slim legs, her plump brown neck, her radiant skin. He remembered the smell of the scent she used, for he had smelled it when she was bending over him while he was tinkering with her bicycle. He would have called it a decadent scent, a night-club perfume, and yet it seemed to come as a natural odour from the sleek smartness of her that was the smile of a sly and ironical sexual self-consciousness.

He gave a jerk to his hat and rode on. He felt that he disliked this young woman, and that he disliked her because a part of him was afraid. He

admired red hair, and yet this hair of hers was burnished, audacious and hot.

"Damn!" he said, and tried to pull his thoughts clear.

He was aware now of what she suggested, just as Car had been caught by the same suggestion. It is not usual to credit women with the lust of adventure, but adventure was in Isobel Copredy's blood.

She could not help it, and she did not want to help it, but it sometimes spelt tragedy and bitterness for some man, and perhaps for some other woman. "Provocative yet unsatisfying"—that was how a particular man had once described her, and he had clinched the description with a word which men use only when they are alone together. It is doubtful whether John Stretton had ever used it, for he had never had anything to do with that sort of woman.

As he wheeled his bicycle over Burnt Heath he was conscious of a twinge of loneliness, just as though a girl's casual suggestion could produce the actual feeling. He realized that he did not matter to anybody, save perhaps to his mother. But he was on his guard. The devil of discontent has the face of a woman.

"What use is your philosophy, my lad?" he reflected, "if it crumples up on the first hot day."

As he neared the cottage he heard Paul howling, another victim of loneliness, tied up in the wood shed. Stretton smiled a smile that was half grim, half gentle.

"Shall a man howl like a dog! Poor old Paul!"

But he was glad of the dog's welcome, a boisterous, warm-hearted welcome, and he fondled the spaniel as he had never fondled him before. Virginia minced in, yellow eyed and rather supercilious, and ready to remind the man that there are such things as saucers and milk.

"Hallo, you hussy!"

And then it occurred to him that it must be rather pleasant to be met by a woman, his happy, deep-eyed, ideal woman, not a brazen goddess with flaming hair.

"Oh, no doubt," he said with a shrug, and preparing to wait upon Virginia; "but that's not in the scheme. It seems to me that it never can be."

By way of discipline he went out and hoed weeds till the dusk fell.

XII

LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI

ISOBEL COPREDY'S attitude to life and to men can be explained by extracts from a diary which she had kept for the last five years. It was a rather extraordinary piece of human self-analysis, supremely sincere in its egotism, and quite fearless in its facing of certain facts. On the opening page she had written a number of concise and pointed sayings, adding to them from time to time in her bold, hard, confident hand:

"The great thing in life is to be the player and not the instrument.

"A woman remains interesting only so long as she continues to interest men.

"It is a great mistake to imagine that men begin things. The provocation always comes from the woman.

"There are two ways of regarding marriage: as an opening or a closing door—the French way and the English. Personally I prefer to do without a door.

"Most men are very dull fish when once you have got them hooked.

"A woman who neglects her complexion is immoral.

"After all, with all our talk about beauty and spirituality and ideals, what does it all come to? Trying to make the best of the inside of an ugly house.

"Take care of your teeth, and see that the heels of your shoes do not turn over.

"Have a good time now. If you are worth it you will get it. If you are not worth it, be religious.

"Sentiments are like clothes. Their effectiveness depends upon how they are worn. In supreme moments of honest naturalness you do without them.

"All the same, the petticoat was the greatest of all feminine inventions.

"The war was a great adventure; the most wonderful mixture of tosh and reality. Like champagne, it made a lot of us behave just as we wanted to behave. We insisted on getting our bite at life. Now we are returning to our trick of nibbling at the sugar icing, or sneaking an occasional cherry.

"I refuse to humbug myself. But you must humbug other people. That's civilization."

IT was a supreme misfortune for John Stretton that he should have begun to interest this merciless young woman. She was piqued by his unusualness; she said so quite frankly in her diary.

> "This Adam is afraid of me. It talks with God in its garden and covers everything with fig leaves; and I believe that it is perfectly sincere. It has always made me laugh to think of meeting a Galahad. I never have, outside a book.
>
> "Adam interests me. He looks as brown as a berry. He has a past, and is trying to bury it in his garden. It would be so much easier to wash it and hang it up to dry on the line. He keeps a dog and a cat, wears no collar, and is very much out of Eden.
>
> "I suppose I ought to pity him. I do. Someone once told me—I think it was 'Tabbs'—that I must have been a beastly kid who never played with a doll. Quite right; I didn't. It was not my fault. I am not made that way.
>
> "If Adam insists on remaining in the garden I shall have to introduce the serpent!"

That was her trouble, this daughter of disillusionment; she lacked the mother spirit and all that it implied. Not that the rearing of children necessarily makes people more pleasant; it makes them more patient and more resigned or autocratic; they become sentimentalists or Puritans. The point is, children spell discomfort, hard work, a great deal of giving up, especially on the woman's side. She cannot be a mother and insist on herself all the time. Even her breasts suggest that. But Isobel Copredy did insist on being herself, always and everywhere. She would not give up; she would not suffer; and without giving up and without suffering there are certain things which we humans do not learn. We remain nasty, self-assertive children with a little more cynical cleverness added to our nastiness. Feeling is understanding. Unless we feel we do not sympathize or understand. A man may be a senior wrangler and at the same time the most pathetic and pestilent fool.

To Isobel Copredy poor Stretton was a new and rather unusual toy. She was quite ready to take his struggling ideal and to play with it, and to break

it in the game. She did not feel the necessity for ideals. She was just a strong, self-assertive, greedy child, with an unpleasant knack of seeing life naked. She had a passion for adventure, any sort of adventure, and she would have enjoyed nothing more than plaguing St. Anthony in the desert.

It is doubtful whether she realized that a life such as Stretton's spelt struggle and spiritual sweat. The thing was ridiculous. Why cry over spilt milk? Go and buy another jug of it. She saw no dignity, no pathos in this man's self-isolation, his hard labour, his passion to prove himself, to plant himself among simple things and to grow. Had she known the whole truth it is doubtful whether she would have pitied him. Most probably she would have despised him as a man who had surrendered, and who had failed in the cut-throat game of making money.

Anyway, the country was dull; she had broken with her latest playmate; she was rather short of money and had no very exciting social distractions on hand. Moreover, Stretton piqued her; she liked his freckles and his leanness, his stag-like head and quick eyes. She knew that he was afraid of her, and she knew why. One thing she did not and could not know—that she was the female counterpart of the male type that had provoked in him those strange outbursts of blind, physical fury.

At one end of the Ottways' tennis court there happened to be a lime tree that was a little in the way. The previous landlord had refused to allow the Copredys to fell it, and this lime tree now took part in another game.

Stretton received a letter.

> "DEAR MR. STRETTON,—I am writing for my father to ask you whether you have any objection to our felling a tree—not a big one—which spoils our tennis court. It is too close to the back line and cramps that side of the court.—Yours truly, ISOBEL COPREDY."

Stretton frowned over this letter. The part of him which she antagonized was in the ascendant. He wrote to her quite politely to say that he did not approve of felling trees. Could not the court be shifted?

As a matter of fact, he was felling some of his own trees in one of the plantations where they needed thinning, and there were also quite a number of dead larches which had to be cut out. He wanted fence posts, and they were here for the labour of getting. He did not know his lady, or the laugh she would have of him.

She drove her new two-seater right up over the heath to the Cottage, picking her way along the turf track, and, leaving the car by the gate, went in search of her victim. Stretton was in the wood, felling a fir. He had not heard the car, and Isobel Copredy, strolling up the ride between the two stretches of woodland, heard his felling axe at work. She stood still and smiled. The humour of the surprise was self-evident.

Stretton did not see her till she was quite close upon him. It was a hot day in May, with air full of hover flies and the scent of the pines. Bracken was springing up everywhere, and in the tops of the trees a pigeon was calling. The trunk of a felled fir lay along the ground, its branches raising one end of it so that it suggested a great hobby-horse.

"Good morning."

She was smiling, mischievous, a little ironical.

"Please don't stop. I will wait till you have finished throwing that tree."

She sat herself down on the trunk of the fir, her legs crossed, the burnished swathes of her red hair showing under the brim of her black hat. Stretton was leaning on the handle of the felling axe, trying to think of something to say to her.

"So you do fell trees sometimes!" And she laughed. "Please finish that one, and then I'll talk to you about mine."

He looked at her, and was more aware of the May morning and the smell of the pines. She had rolled up the sleeves of her green jumper and her forearms showed white.

"Oh, it's about that tree?" he said.

"Yes; I want you to come down and look at it. I have got my new car outside your gate."

"Outside my gate?"

"I did a cross-country stunt to test the springs."

She glanced at the tree that he was felling, and it was easy to see that he was very raw at the job. Instead of cutting out a neat wedge and then sawing towards it through the trunk, he had been mangling the fir with his axe, and the bole showed a white collar of hacked wood. Isobel Copredy had seen lumbermen at work during the war, and she knew how a tree should be felled. She knew, too, that the conventional attitude for the woman is to

appear to know less than the man, but her theory was to cut across the conventions.

"Have you got a saw?" she asked.

"Yes."

His glance was veiled yet inquiring.

"I'll show you how the Canadians do it."

She jumped up, and picking up the saw started to make a cut across the trunk some three inches above the mangled collar. She knelt on one knee, while Stretton stood by with an air of sulky surprise and resentful helplessness, wishing her at Jericho. And then his eyes fixed themselves on the nape of her neck. She had a very comely neck; white and sensuous.

She looked up at him suddenly.

"How you are hating me for showing you this!"

"Not at all."

"Oh, yes, you are. But why should a woman always be expected to be a fool? I'm not a fool."

She gave him a glimmer of the eyes, and something shot through him. He stiffened.

"I hope I am always ready to learn."

"Good boy."

She resumed her sawing, her chin thrust forward, her face aglow.

"Say, you might give me your coat to kneel on."

He did so, folding it up and placing it for her while she drew aside and smiled at him. A strand of hair had slipped down across her cheek.

"Bother!"

She whipped off her hat, and, sticking the pins back into it, gave it him to hold.

"Oh, no. I'm only starting the job for you. You shall use your arms in a minute."

When the cut was about three inches deep she withdrew the saw and got up, flushed and out of breath.

“Now, do you think you can cut a neat wedge? Wait, I’ll have a shot myself.”

She took the axe and left him holding her hat much as a shy boy holds a cup and saucer at a tea party, and she used the axe cleanly and with more precision than Stretton had shown, striking slanting blows that brought the wedge-shaped chips scattering to the ground. Presently she paused, out of breath and roguish.

“Now do you see the idea? You take the saw and cut across towards the notch, and the tree comes over this way.”

He nodded, and handing her back her hat set to work, while she stood and watched him. It took Stretton nearly twenty minutes to saw through the trunk towards the notch she had cut, and all that time neither of them uttered a word.

“Look out. She’s quivering.”

He stood back, but though the top swayed slightly, the tree still held.

“You haven’t a steel wedge?”

“No.”

“They knock in a wedge on the far side, and that sends the tree over. Come on, let’s try pushing.”

She put both hands to the trunk, but though the line of the saw-cut gaped, she was not strong enough to start the fall.

“Come on, both together,” she said with a quick turn of the head.

He joined her; he was taller than she was.

“Put your arms over my shoulders and be ready to jump clear.”

There was a cracking of wood, and the trunk swung away from them more quickly than either of them had expected. Stretton had to save himself and the girl; he caught her and pulled her back.

“Sorry, but I had to.”

The tree had crashed, and he dropped his arms; but she remained touching him and looking up over one shoulder.

“You will know how to do it another time.”

He stood back from her, looking stiff and shy, and a little confused. His shyness amused her.

“I hope so. I say, I have trodden on your hat!”

She was delighted. She began to laugh, and Stretton had to laugh with her.

“Oh, that’s splendid!”

She picked it up.

“You have made a new shape. Heavens, and my hair is coming down!”

She shook her head, and the red swathes tumbled on her shoulders.

“Oh, rescue the pins, will you? This comes of lumbering with a man! Do you mind if I go into your place and put myself straight? I suppose I shall find a mirror?”

She was pulling the pins out of her hair while Stretton groped for the ones that had fallen. He had a feeling of bewilderment, of passionate embarrassment. He hated her, but he hated her with desire.

“I’m sorry. Please make any use of my place.”

He became very punctilious and polite, shy of her and still more shy of himself. At that time he had no reason to think her anything but a mischievous tomboy, but all the glow and movement and breathlessness of her had gone to his head. He had lived alone and suppressed himself for months, and her body had touched his, and he was ashamed. It was quite absurd, this queer sense of humiliation. He was angry with himself and he was angry with her. What the devil did she want to come playing about here for? It was all wrong. For there was a part of him that was wiser than he knew, a voice that cried fiercely, “Hold off, hold off!” And he held off with that chivalry which is ready to smite itself in the face.

She gave him an intimate, observant look.

“Now I am going to drive you down to look at my tree. I have helped you with yours.”

He wanted to refuse, and he couldn’t. He felt that he owed her something after having felt about her as he had.

“What about these clothes?”

“I don’t mind them,” she said. “Now, if you will let me go and tidy my hair.”

He picked up his coat and took her through the woodlands to the cottage. She had grown demure, sleek and silent, amused by his air of courteous

aloofness, and understanding it better than he guessed. In her housemaid language, he was a nice boy, and had been taught to behave nicely.

"May I have a mirror?"

"You will find one in the sitting-room," he said rather curtly.

He remained outside the gate, and she weighed his motives in leaving her the cottage to herself. He was pretending to look at the new car, and as she put her hair up in his sitting-room she watched him through the window. Also she gathered a quick impression of the room itself, a room in which there was not a single photo, and where pipes and books lay about. It was a completely male room, cleanly and healthily so.

"You innocent!" she said.

He was quietly yet pleasantly formal as she drove him down over the heath past the gate of Romans Farm to Ottways. He admired her handling of the car. They did not meet a soul in the lanes, and at Ottways he condemned the lime tree.

She offered to drive him back, but he refused, and there was an air of finality about his refusal. He had condemned the tree and escaped meeting Colonel Copredy, who had gone fishing.

"That's the end of it," he thought as he walked back to Mascall's Wood to resume his tree felling, whereas Isobel Copredy assumed it to be the beginning.

In the lane by Romans Farm Stretton fell in with Thomas Viner. Old Viner was wearing his white linen coat and a sun-stained Panama hat with the brim turned up at the back. His shrewd eyes looked out kindly from under this shelf of shadow.

"Ay, it's good weather. I was coming up to see how your land's looking. Come in and have a cup of tea with us, Mr. Stretton."

Stretton was glad of old Viner; he was one of those reassuring stolid and comfortable people who are good for us when the soul is vexed.

"I'll come in if you'll walk up afterwards."

"Sure."

From his cottage windows Stretton had watched the spring touch Romans Farm; he had seen a whiteness gathering about it, the blossom on its orchard trees. A little later the red-brown roofs and walls had sunk deeper and deeper into a mist of green. The growth of the year flowed round it,

secretly and with a mysterious stealth. The grass lengthened, and in wild corners sheep's parsley and pink campion rioted together. The windows looked out through greenness at the soft distances of an English landscape.

Stretton had glanced often towards the farm. He saw it in the early sunlight, at full noon, in the evening, and always it spoke to him of peace. The peace of the place cooled his thoughts and effaced the glow of Isobel Copredy's provocative colouring. It was a house that accepted you, put you in a comfortable chair, and soothed you with simple sounds such as the crackling of the wood fire or the humming of the bees in the honeysuckle.

Stretton liked its funny chintzes, its Victorian furniture, its faded carpets, its broad simplicity. You did not get too much light in the room. The ceilings were low, the walls full of cupboards. He liked Mrs. Viner's teacups, big white cups with narrow bands of gold on them, her red velvet teacosy, her bread and butter, her home-made cake. And he liked her. She seemed to him to be just what an elderly woman should be, proof against all weathers, mellow, homely.

She was putting wallflowers in the vases, and she went on arranging the flowers while her husband wandered off to give his carter some orders. Stretton took the chair by one of his open windows where a curtain breathed gently to and fro.

"I like the smell of them," she told him. "Jess always will have flowers in the house when she is at home."

"Is Jess your daughter?"

"The youngest. I suppose we shall have her back some day."

She glanced at Stretton, and, crossing to the mantelpiece, took down a photograph and brought it for him to see. Stretton got up.

"That's Jess. She had her hair down then, you see."

Stretton looked at her photograph with inward inattentiveness. He just held it in his hand and stared. He saw a rather thin girl of sixteen with her hair upon her shoulders, frank eyes and a sensitive mouth. She still looked rather childish and undeveloped. There seemed nothing vivid about her, nothing to arrest his attention.

"How old is she?"

"Oh, Jess is twenty-six now," said Mary Viner, resuming possession of the photograph. "That's a poor thing. She has filled out a lot; you would not know Jess by that."

She replaced the portrait on the mantelpiece, and the tea-tray and Tom Viner arrived together. After tea he and Stretton walked up to Mascall's Wood. Stretton had forgotten all about Jessie Viner's picture; it had made no impression on him; in fact, he had thought her rather a plain child. He took Thomas Viner to look at his potatoes.

XIII

THE THUNDERSTORM

THE soul of man when vexed and hard pressed makes its escape into mysticism.

Stretton had dug his ground, put in his crops, and built his fence. Two section buildings had arrived and were waiting to be erected, but he was too busy to deal with them at present. He had his hands full of the growth of the year, the first growth of the kind that he had ever known. He was filled with excitements and exultations. When his potatoes came pushing through the soil he looked on the phenomenon as though it were a miracle. His strings of young lettuce, all gold and green, his trenches of peas, his beans, were equally fascinating and wonderful. He sowed his marrow and cucumber seeds like an incredulous child, and was conscious of a moment of astonishment when he saw the green seed-leaves showing in the pots. He hoed, he weeded, he thinned out, he hung over his garden-frames like a mother over a cradle. In the cool of the evening he would stroll about his little estate with the black spaniel at his heels, sharing in the meditation of his trees, looking at the flowers—old cottage flowers—in his two borders, at the red may tree, the white thorns on the heath, the yellow gorse, the blue distances beyond the Willowmaston valley. He was obsessed by the wonder of it all, the beauty. The vein of mysticism in him deepened and grew enriched; he was not very actively conscious of it as yet, but he was to be very conscious of it later.

He was so absorbed in life, active, growing life during those months of May and June that La Belle Dame sans Merci had no power over him at all. He met her fairly frequently; it surprised him how often they happened to meet; he still thought her innocent, a little irresponsible and impulsive, for like many sensitive men he thought most women innocent. Sometimes, in the heat of the day or at night, he had vague and troublesome thoughts of her, but they were not so vivid and compelling as to vex either his spirit or his flesh.

Rollin Beal, who paid him a flying visit about that time, found him brown and bright-eyed and happy. He put Beal up for the night, himself sleeping in his old camp bed. They sat up late on the edge of the heath, talking of many things, and it was when they were carrying their chairs in from the heath that Stretton asked Beal a question.

“I want you to tell me something: It doesn’t affect me now, but it might do some day. Ought I to marry?”

Beal let some seconds pass before answering him.

“Wait a while,” he said.

They had reached the gate and they paused there in the moonlight.

“I ought to qualify that answer, Jack. I want to see you go for a year without anything happening. It is not a question of the thing being transmissible to your children.”

“No.”

“The point is: you ought not to take a woman into partnership until you are sure of your liabilities.”

Stretton stood very still.

“Exactly,” he said. “I don’t mind telling you that I am one of those people who has a high idea of marriage. I don’t believe in all the modern makeshift stuff. That’s why I feel it my duty to keep clear of women.”

“That should depend on the woman. Sex is both complex and very simple.”

“Do you know what my test will be, Beal?”

“Well?”

“I shall not be conscious of the sex in her when I meet her. What I mean is—it will all be subtlized, transfigured. I often wonder whether people really love in these days.”

“Oh, yes, they do, a few of them. As a doctor I have seen what death means. Go on being a practical mystic.”

“So that is your diagnosis?”

“Yes. Trust your intuition.”

Yet life fluctuates like the seasons; it is full of periods of growth, flowering, decay, and youth may be more sensitive to these changes and less master of them and their meaning. Relaxation comes after effort, a relaxation that is fretted with moments of restlessness, vague discontents, a passionate desire for some other form of self-expression. Youth has to learn to ride on the great adventure and how to use its weapons. Often it fights

when it should laugh, and it laughs too little. It has moods of immense seriousness; it goes on its knees, is violent, inspired, overwhelmed.

And through it all runs the red blood which will not turn to milk, however much we pray. Here instinct may be wiser than we know. Youth divines this, the youth which dreams and refuses to be browbeaten by the cynics. Was there wine or red blood in the grail, or wine and blood together? Why will scoffers confuse the love match with the lust match? Stretton divined all this as many a young man and woman have divined it. "Only by love can I be saved." Yes, and by such and such a love in which the sex in us is glorified and transfigured into a sacrament of tenderness and compassion. So youth leaps through the gate of marriage, holding his mate by the hand, expecting a garden, and finding thickets and crooked paths. But let that first love last; let the hands hold fast. Love learns; it grows wise, if it be patient. Always in the man's mind the thought, "I have taken her life in my hands; shall I break it?" In the woman's, "I have taken his life into my bosom. Shall I let it grow cold?" Courage, a courage that is never petulant and mean, a compassion that reaches understanding.

For nothing that is worth having is won too easily in this life, and the great comradeship is the worthiest of them all. We work for success in business. How many of us work for success in that other and much more blessed venture? How many men have failed or made but a half success for lack of this great comradeship? How many women have grieved and shrivelled because they could not give all that a woman longs to give? It is easy to say that Nature dresses up sex to fool us. Yes, and many are fooled. But is not the sense of our foolishness the beginning of all wisdom? Life is a maze. It may be that only the few are fated to find the inner sanctuary, the few who have courage, the few who refuse to sneer.

When the prime growth of the year was over came a period of relaxation. July was fickle and wet, and though full of greenness, sad as only England can be sad. Stretton had his first twinge of restlessness. Looking back it seemed to him that all the world had mated and that he was out of time with the year.

It was as though he smelt the salt sea and longed for it. He bethought him of old corners in France, old billets, some laughing French girl, his seasons of leave. He remembered Leicester Square on a hot August night, the river about Marlow, punts, the flickering shadows of great trees, the still water, a white dress, the voices of girls, boys bathing. Rude life surged in him, and he fought it back.

And why?

He asked himself that question as he sat in the bracken one close night and watched the moon rise over the hills. Nor had he any very definite answer to give. Vaguely he felt the insurgent restlessness in him to be an enemy only because it attacked him when he had sworn to stand on guard. He had the stubbornness that will not surrender even to things that are pleasing.

But why?

What would he gain? What was the ideal? Was it an ideal or mere sentimental foolishness?

He had known men who had never troubled to resist, men who took their pleasures and laughed, men whom he had liked. Most men were made that way. Why did he stiffen up and fight?

It was not religion; he had no religion as it was understood by his parents. It was not raw nature: nor was it reason, for a reasonable carefulness made the thing easy. It was something inside himself, a vague pride, his mysticism, a feeling that he had a religion of his own, faith in certain intuitions, and above all what may be described as a sense of knightliness. If a man were not his own master, was he fit to be the master of anything?

"I have only got to go on working," he thought, "and dig in here. What do I want? The moon?"

And then he laughed, remembering one of Bairnsfather's cartoons.

"That ruddy moon will be the death of me!"

There followed a few days of great heat which ended in a thunderstorm. Stretton always remembered that storm, for he had good cause to remember it. He had ridden down to Kingsbury for tobacco and a sun-hat, and as he rode out of the town he saw the black canopy in the north. It spread with surprising rapidity, sending out little wisps of blackness ahead of it like aerial cavalry in an advance. There was no thunder as yet, only a great stillness, and a close heat. Stretton took off his coat and laid it over the handlebars as he climbed the long hill out of Willowmaston, and here the avenue of beeches failed for once to be cool. The trees were a breathless heavy green with a most strange light beneath them. One end of the avenue was in sunshine, but half-way up the hill the sunshine was blotted out, and the arch of the sky was one great blackness. The first flash came as Stretton was passing Ottways, but it was far ahead among the high woods. He did not notice Ottways, and afterwards this struck him as strange.

When he reached Romans Farm the storm was in full flare above the woods beyond Burnt Heath. For the moment he thought of taking refuge with the Viners, but he decided to push on, thinking that he could reach the cottage before the rain began, but he was less than half-way across the heath when he saw it coming like a grey wall. A sudden wind shook the furze bushes and made the birches bend and rustle. He saw trees almost disappear in the rain like figures in a smoke screen. The lightning was uncomfortably near, and the thunder seemed to crack the sky above him.

He rode for it, realizing that it was both useless and dangerous to take cover. And then the rain enveloped him. It came down with a wet roar and a suggestion of menace. He was wet through long before he reached the cottage.

Stretton pushed his bicycle into the wood-shed. Everything green was dashed and weighed down by the rain, and the branches of a lilac lay across the path. He had not troubled to lock his door, Burnt Heath being no sponging ground for tramps, but he was surprised to find the door wide open. He remembered shutting it. The door opened directly into the kitchen, and as he swung his drenched hat, he became aware of something, a little thrill of laughter.

He went in and stood dripping on the threshold.

“Poor man!” said the girl’s voice, “you are wetter than I am.”

She was sitting on his sofa with Virginia purring in her lap. A white hat, pulped, and with the colour running from its ribbon, hung on the back of one of his rush-bottomed chairs, and a semi-transparent green waterproof lay across the seat. She had taken down her hair; it was drenched and heavy and the colour of copper. He noticed too that her shoes were off, and that her feet and ankles were wet.

He stood and stared.

“Now you are not going to scold me,” she said, “for not getting wet through! I made a dash for your cottage.”

Virginia looked at him with her yellow eyes. He laughed. There seemed nothing for it but laughter.

“So you got caught?”

“Somewhat. But I was a wiser virgin than you. I did take a rainproof with me. Why, you are soaked.”

She put the cat aside and stood up, giving a toss to her wet hair. Her face was mischievous, aglow. When she moved he saw that her wet stockings left their impress on the carpet.

"Hadn't you better take those off?" he said.

"And what about you?"

She touched the sleeve of his coat, and a strange thrill went through him. He stiffened.

"If you will excuse me I will go and change."

"Do," she said.

And then she dropped him a curtsy.

"Please, sir, may I stay here till it is over? Virginia will act as chaperon."

He relented. After all, what was she but a laughing girl caught in a storm? Had he ever resented anyone taking refuge in his dug-out?

"Please do. I'm afraid I have nothing but socks."

"Oh, never mind the socks," she laughed; "I'll get over that difficulty."

He went upstairs with a queer, burning feeling within him. He pulled off his wet things, towelled himself, and realized that the rain was still coming down. He felt guiltily glad of that; she would not be able to go yet. And then a cross-current struck across his mood of provocation. "You cad!" he said. He dawdled; he wasted as much time as he could over redressing, watching the grey rain rushing upon the green world. How fresh it was! He wondered what she was doing, whether it would not be more chivalrous of him to stay upstairs until she could go.

Then he heard a clinking sound and started. He listened attentively while he buttoned his collar. His wrist-watch told him that it was half-past four. He thought he heard her moving about downstairs. Perhaps she was going.

He took three minutes over tying his tie.

Suddenly he heard her voice.

"Man thing," she called, "don't you want any tea?"

He was conscious of terror, exultation. Very slowly he went to the head of the steep stairs.

"Hallo! Miss Copredy? Did you call?"

“I asked you whether you wanted any tea. I do. Virgie and me have made it. I had an awful business finding the tea.”

“Oh,” he said helplessly, “did you?”

“Who ever would have thought of looking inside a tobacco tin! But I did.”

“All right,” he said. “I’ll come down.”

She was not in the sitting-room when he descended the stairs, but he saw that she had drawn the round oak table close to the sofa and had set out the tea-things. Stretton found her in the kitchen, waiting for the kettle to boil; she had taken off her stockings, and her naked feet showed white on the red bricks. She shook back her hair and smiled.

“We ought to be filmed, you know, doing this. Tess makes tea for Angel Clare!”

He was quite voiceless for a moment. He had a sudden and most damnably clear vision of her as what she was or as what he thought she was. Her audacity shocked him, and inflamed him even while it shocked. He knew that he would not want to marry a woman who made him feel as this woman made him feel. He had ceased to think her irresponsible. He could have taken a stick to her, or twisted a hand into her hair, and yet if he touched her he knew that something else might happen.

All he said was: “Hadn’t I better get you some socks?”

She was watching the kettle, and she turned and looked at him over her shoulder.

“Yes, please do.”

He blundered off, and she allowed herself a spasm of smothered laughter. She had shocked him, and she had expected him to be shocked, but there was more behind his tense shyness; of that she was sure.

“He is rather refreshing,” she reflected.

He came down with the socks, a pair of black ones, and she sat down and put them on. She could not resist an ironical and wicked look at him from under her hair.

“Now we are quite respectable.”

He said nothing, and since the kettle was boiling she made the tea.

She had to take charge of him in his own cottage, for he was as rigid and inarticulate as the most awkward of schoolboys. She sat down on the sofa behind the table and made him give her a cushion. He remained standing and she had to look at him before he made a move to sit down, and she saw him take one of the straight-backed rush-bottoms.

This amused her. His discomfort was piquant, and she let him sit on that hard chair like a Simon Stylites on his pillar. Rather ostentatiously she allowed herself to take up most of the sofa, sitting slantwise, one black-socked foot thrust out half mockingly.

"Sugar?"

"Please."

"And milk, I suppose?"

"Yes."

She handed him his cup, and she noticed that his hand shook, and that he did not seem able to look at her.

"Really," she said, "do you like that chair?"

"I am quite all right, thank you."

He passed her the bread and butter.

"I'm afraid I'm out of cake."

"One can't have cake every day. I say, isn't this really rather funny?"

He gave her a fierce look and laughed.

"About as funny as the war."

"Well, wasn't that humorous at times? And weren't you thankful for a pair of dry socks?"

"Often."

"Queer things—men. So afraid of appearing self-conscious."

"Miss Copredy," he said, "I happen to be a man who has made rather a mess of things."

She looked at him queerly.

"That's interesting. But why be self-conscious about it? It ought not to prevent you being——"

He gulped the last of his tea and thrust the cup at her almost in protest. His eyes had an appeal in them, but she had no pity.

“Another cup, please.”

She refilled his cup, while he sat and trembled.

“I told your father,” he said.

Her eyes gave him a full stare.

“You did! But what has my poor parent to do with it—with us? Don’t be silly.”

The rain held for half an hour, and then the sun broke through upon a wet and glistening world. The cool, green freshness of it became part of a memory. Stretton, standing awkwardly by the sofa, turned away while she put on her wet shoes and stockings. She had coiled up her hair, and the fire of it glowed against the green foliage outside the window.

As she picked up her hat and raincoat she gave him the intimate look of a fellow conspirator.

“If you won’t come and have tea with me——”

“I can’t,” he said, half savagely.

She turned to the door.

“Oh, very well. It seems that I have more pluck than you have. Say, isn’t that light on the wet trees gorgeous! The world’s a woman, you know, and she’s been weeping. A rivederci.”

He watched her go down the path into the sun-splashed wetness of the world after a storm.

XIV

STRETTON DEALS WITH A WOMAN

FOR two days Stretton could not work. He loafed about the place, went for long rambles in the woods, or got on his bicycle and rode anywhere, it did not seem to matter where. He felt restless and irritable, unable to fix his thoughts on anything, and for the moment he seemed to have lost all interest in his garden. His sense of security had gone, his faith in the beneficence of the quiet world about him. He was conscious of a curious feeling of suspense, as though some catastrophe menaced him, and he had no means of escape.

The greater part of the third day he spent in Kingsbury, riding down to the old town by a roundabout way. He sat through two performances at the local cinema, had dinner at the George, and rode home under the stars. He had locked up the cottage, and when he opened the door and struck a light he found something white lying on the floor, a note that had been pushed under the door.

It roused in him a quite extraordinary agitation, a burst of anger.

"Damn the woman! Why can't she let me alone!"

He decided not to read the letter, and he took it into the kitchen to burn it; but he did not burn it, for an inward voice suggested cowardice. He read her note, with the candle set upon the kitchen table. There was a mirror on the shelf, and he happened to catch sight of the reflection of his own face in it, and its expression shocked him.

He tore up Isobel Copredy's letter and threw the pieces in the grate, and, going out, walked up and down the garden path. Presently he came in, carried the light into the sitting-room, got out his writing-pad and pen and ink, and sat down at the oak table. He wrote a letter to his mother. He asked her if his sister Madge could come down for a few days, as he had overworked himself and needed cheering up. He had completed the letter and was folding it up when Virginia appeared, and, jumping on the sofa, looked at him with her yellow eyes. He saw more than Virginia on the sofa —a black cushion under a glowing head—and almost before he knew what he had done he had torn up the letter to his mother.

He was conscious of a feeling of exasperation. He picked up the cat, dropped her out of the window and closed the lattice. Then he went to the little outhouse where Paul the dog slept in an old hamper filled with straw. The dog welcomed him affectionately, and Stretton, taking the spaniel in his arms, carried him upstairs and let him sleep at the foot of his bed.

Next day he made a determined attempt to resume the routine of his ordinary working day. The boy Sam Rugglesworth arrived at half-past seven with milk, eggs, half a pound of fresh butter, and Stretton sent a message by him to Romans Farm.

"Sam, will you tell Mrs. Viner that I'll come down after supper? If I am in the way she can turn me out."

Sam was about the stupidest thing on earth, with a gaping mouth and vacant blue eyes.

"You'll coom down after supper, and if she don't want you she'll turn yer out."

"That's it."

"I'll tell 'er," said Sam.

Stretton got to work. He lifted the rest of his early potatoes, hoed his turnips, and having completed his routine work, went on to measuring out and staking the sites for his new buildings. His plan was to place them well back among the trees so that they should not be too obvious and not too near the cottage, yet near enough to be easily got at at night or in wet weather. He intended fencing off a rough track from his yard to the corner of the grass land which he had hired from Thomas Viner. He would need more posts for this, and he knew that they were to be had in one of the plantations on the other side of the wood, where there were a number of half-dead larches and useless young oaks.

He measured and staked out the sites while he smoked his after-dinner pipe, a lazy half-hour before more strenuous work, and then he locked up the cottage, called Paul, and shouldering his felling axe and taking his saw and bill-hook, he marched off to the farther end of the wood. There was more in this manœuvre than he would allow, nor did he christen it a retreat into the wilderness to escape from the world, the flesh and the devil. If anyone came to the cottage they would find it locked and no one about. What more could a mere man do?

Stretton took off his coat, laid it among the bracken and persuaded the spaniel to curl himself up beside it. Then he chose a useless larch and set to

work on it, using the saw as much as possible so as to make less noise. He became absorbed in the work. He felled three trees in succession and so successfully that he decided to knock off for ten minutes and smoke half a pipe. When he went to where his coat was lying he found that the dog had gone.

The disappearance of the spaniel both hurt and annoyed him. The dog had sneaked off to hunt, but his flight left Stretton with a queer sense of desertion. "Couldest not thou watch one hour?" He filled and lit his pipe, and stood looking about him into the deeps of the wood, with its mystery of crowded tree trunks, its flickering lights and shadows. He found himself listening. Gradually a feeling of restlessness stole over him. It was as though he knew that he was alone and yet not alone, surrounded by invisible things, strange woodland creatures, mystery, the spirits of life's impulses. He was afraid. He was conscious of a strange excitement.

Even when he resumed work he could not shake off this feeling of suspense. He kept stopping to listen. Once, when he had thrown a tree, he thought that he heard the sound of laughter, some woodland voice mocking its fall. He was so strung up that he made a dash through the bracken in the direction of the fancied sound, shouting, "Hallo, who's there?"

Of course there was no one there, and he went back to his tree felling with a mingling of disappointment, anger and relief. He had left his watch in his coat pocket, and he found that it was four o'clock, but he made up his mind that he would not go back to the cottage for tea. He was afraid of the cottage. He would go on working till dusk came, and he began to look about him for the next tree. He had chosen it, and was about to kneel down and use the saw when he heard a little gust of laughter, low yet distinct, like the mocking note of some bird.

He straightened, head up, nostrils quivering.

"Who's that?"

No one answered him. He looked about him with a kind of fierce fearfulness and then went on with his work. An obstinate rage glowed in him. He set his teeth and laboured, and tried to close the gates of his senses against everything save the work in hand.

"Damn her!" he kept saying to himself. "Damn her! Two can play at this game."

Again he heard that little thrill of laughter. He bent low and took no notice, but he was conscious of a tragic excitement, a traitorous curiosity. He

tried to smother it. He tried to make himself think of all sorts of other things: his mother, Rollin Beal, the eyes of the dream woman who lived in his inner consciousness, the war, how he had had to lie flat under heavy shell-fire. And all the while he went on sawing, and when the tree fell he was taken by surprise.

He had to jump clear, and following on the crash made by the falling tree he heard a voice calling him.

"Jonathan, Jonathan, I have come to make tea for you."

Stretton's face seemed to darken. He moved slowly in the direction of the voice.

"Where are you?"

"Come and find me; come and find me."

He leapt into the tall bracken and tore through it, moving his arms like a swimmer, and beating about through the flicker of light and shadow. He had no very definite idea of what he meant to do, though he was conscious of anger, and of more than anger. There was something in his head about putting the fear of God in her, though in the wild chase that followed his head mattered less and less, and the blood of him more and more.

"You jade," he shouted; "get out of my wood!"

She laughed and showed herself for a moment.

"Man thing—what manners!"

He saw her white face and the gleam of her hair half hidden behind a tree trunk some fifty yards away. He gave chase, and she dived like a bird to cover. There was much fern here, and it was very tall, and he could see a swaying of the fronds as she moved through it. He was breathing deeply through pinched nostrils, and his eyes had a steady glare in them. He felt himself growing cunning. She was less than thirty yards from him now, but he tracked her relentlessly, with fierce leisureliness, watching the green tops of the fern.

Suddenly he saw all movement cease. He was quite near to the place where she lay hidden, and he stood still and waited. Presently he noticed a slight trembling of the patch of bracken. The coronet of her red hair appeared, and then her face, as though rising out of green water. Their eyes met. They were less than five yards from each other.

"Hallo, Mr. Pan!" she said.

He made a straight dash at her through the fern as though he knew that what he had to do must be done quickly. She rose to him, half defiant, half laughing. There was a little scuffle, and then Stretton had her by the hair. If she must challenge the brute in him, the retort should be unexpected.

"Keep still," he said in a fierce, thick voice, "or I shall hurt you."

He made her turn about and he marched her through the bracken and down through the woodland towards the ride which led to the cottage and the heath. At first she struggled a little, but gave it up when she realized the strength and passion of his grip. He could not see her face; he did not wish to see it. He imagined her fury, and he was glad.

"You beast!" she said.

He made no reply. In fact, he did not utter a word until he had her out on the heath a good fifty yards from the cottage. He had astonished her, and he had astonished himself. He thought that he had settled it.

"Sorry," he said, "but if you come up here again I'll thrash you."

He released her. She stood back looking at him with some of her colour gone and her eyes blazing.

"Oh, will you! You are a pretty average cad!"

"Do you think so?" he retorted, holding himself in.

And then she laughed.

"Idiot! I'm not a person to be threatened. Really, I think this is the most naïve affair."

He pointed down the hill.

"Please oblige me by going. You are a most infernal nuisance."

She tossed her head, gave him a queer, veiled look and prepared to go.

"I rather like being a nuisance, my dear."

"Oh, do you!" he said.

He turned his back on her and walked to the cottage, trembling as he had sometimes trembled in France in moments of great excitement and of fear.

"That should settle it," he thought, and the thought was half a prayer.

XV

THE GREATER PROVOCATION

"WHAT children, what savages we are," he reflected as he held a match to the wood fire in the kitchen and put the kettle on to boil. He had calmed down. What was more, he was conscious of a deep sense of relief, of having thrown something from his shoulders, and he felt the lighter and the happier for it. Resting his forehead against the old oak mantelshelf he watched the flames playing through the brittle wood, and wondered why he had been so rough.

"It had to be," he reflected, "otherwise——"

He was sorry for his roughness, but when his thoughts went deeper he began to understand that his roughness had not hurt her, and that it had hurt him more than it had hurt her. He remembered that queer veiled look of hers as she had turned to go. She was extraordinarily hard and bold.

"I did not know that women were like that."

A moment later he qualified the thought.

"But not all women. I suppose it is dull down at Ottways, and she thought she would have a game with me. Well, that's settled."

But directly that he had assured himself that it was settled he began to doubt the finality of what had happened. He had handled her so roughly that she might bear malice and try some other trick. He did not believe that she would attempt to provoke the man in him again, but this was his first experience of women in the raw, and it had shocked him. He felt vaguely uneasy, and he went to the window.

In the blue gap between the old thorns and yews he saw Romans Farm as a chequer of red and green in the afternoon sunlight. He remembered that he had arranged to go and have supper with the Viners, and he was glad. What wholesome people they were! He stood looking at the farm, and it had a soothing and cooling effect upon him; all the associations connected with it were good. It was a little centre of growth to which the hay and the corn were gathered in, and to which the cows came home at milking time. It was full of nameless, pleasant perfumes, of flowers growing in odd corners, of fruit trees, and of urgent, happy life. He had heard that farming folk were suspicious, narrow and mean, but he had not found the Viners so.

For the rest he was aware that the heath was empty, as much of it as he could see, and he did not doubt but that my lady had footed it back to Ottways in a fine Georgian rage. The kettle was boiling, and he turned to and made the tea, sitting down to it in the kitchen, and not in that other room where Isobel Copredy had lounged upon his sofa. Half-way through the meal Paul arrived, an apologetic, dusty, plausible creature slinking in at the front door. He wagged a stumpy tail and looked at Stretton with eyes which said: "A fellow must have a bit of a lark, you know, sometimes." And Stretton forgave him. To suffer and to be tried makes a man more human, even to his dog.

It was not till after tea, when the call came for his tobacco pouch, that Stretton remembered that he had left his coat and tools in the wood, but as he had a number of jobs to do about the house and garden he filled a pipe from the tobacco tin on the shelf and left his coat to be salvaged later. He was busy for a couple of hours, and the Viners supped at eight. About seven he went for his coat and tools, walking up through the woodlands in the cool of the evening. A bank of clouds had formed in the west, shutting out the sun and filling the wood with a sense of premature dusk. There was no wind moving, and it was very tranquil and still, and Stretton paused for a while to watch a squirrel playing in a Scotch fir. The oaks and beeches on the other side of the ride raised a dark green canopy, and the light was so subdued that the more distant trunks lost themselves in a background of soft gloom. Stretton did not hurry. He knew that he had time to wash and change and walk down to Romans Farm by eight o'clock.

And the peace of the woodlands had fallen upon him, the tranquillity of the trees. He was not a moralist. He had the sensitive and clean man's instinct for things which were good and which were not good, and he knew that their goodness depended on the woman. That was why he was passionately prejudiced in his desire to believe in women. It is probable that he did not realize how near he had been to disaster, and how near he still was to disaster, and that a man's soul is a cauldron which some wild witch may stir up with a stick.

Stretton had left his coat lying close to a clump of bracken. It was still there, and he picked it up and turned away to collect his woodman's tools, but as he turned away a figure rose out of the fern—the red witch with a stick. She had cut a hazel wand with his bill-hook, trimmed it, hidden herself near his coat and waited for him to come for it.

She lashed at him with all her strength, and the whip end of the hazel rod caught him along the cheek. The blow hurt; it left a red mark which did not

fade for days; but it did more than that: it stung Stretton's temper. He swung round and faced her.

"Confound you!"

He saw her red lips drawn back over her teeth, her mocking, laughing eyes. She struck at him again, but he put up his coat and smothered the blow, and next moment he had hold of the stick.

"Let go."

There was a struggle for that stick. She was very strong and quite reckless, and she fought for it like a fierce young girl who knows that she has the boy at a disadvantage. She mocked him with insolent bravado. Stretton had to drop his coat and use both hands, but she was nearly as strong as he was, and much more confident. The young blood in both of them began to flame. They were at close quarters now, wrestling together, breathing fast and hard, their faces almost touching, their bodies straining against each other.

Then Stretton got the stick, twisting it so that she had to let go. He saw something more than rage come into her eyes. She threw her arms round his neck and pulled him down into the fern. He felt her strong young teeth in his shoulder.

IT was dark when she came out of the wood on to the stretch of heath below the cottage. She was weeping with rage and pain and the disillusionment of a balked desire; her hair was down; her stockings hung about her ankles. A little behind her walked the man, a figure of humiliation and self-horror; one sleeve of his shirt had been torn off, and there was blood on his face and the marks left by her fingernails.

"I'm sorry," he kept saying. "I'm sorry. I ought to have told you before."

She subsided into the heather, for she was very near exhaustion.

"You tried to kill me," she said in a hoarse voice. "My throat; you got me by the throat."

He stood there with his head hanging down.

"I ought to have told you, but I never thought. It only happened before with men."

"Men! What do you mean?"

She looked up sharply, the fingers of her right hand feeling her throat.

"It was the war," he said. "I was shell-shocked, and after that—things happened sometimes."

He had an impression of her shrinking from him as she half lay in the heather.

"You mean—you attack people?"

"Yes."

His voice was toneless and miserable.

"I can't help it. The last time they sent me to prison. That is why I came down here; I wanted to be alone and to try to heal myself."

She did not pity him. She was filled with a kind of fury at the thought that she had been attracted by him, for he had become as repellent to her as a sick animal. Moreover, his misery and his humiliation were so obvious and so acute that she felt herself his master.

"Why, you are just a homicidal maniac."

He remained quite motionless.

"No, no, I am not that. Don't say that. If you had left me alone——"

She sprang up.

"My God! What have I been doing?"

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry."

She stood looking at him. She became aware of more light spreading in the darkness; it was the moon rising, and she could see the man's white face.

"If I hadn't fought like a wild cat you would have killed me," she said.

"Thank God you were strong," he said.

And then he asked her:

"What am I to do? What do you want me to do? I must have hurt you most damnably."

"You did."

"I will do anything. Do you wish me to go and give myself up?"

She laughed, and her laughter was unpleasant.

"Do I! Pull yourself together and don't be a fool. I'll hush it up."

He hated her. How he hated her! He felt that she had destroyed everything, more than she knew.

"But what will you say?"

"Say! Nothing. Unless it is necessary. I haven't looked in my glass yet. We women are sensitive creatures. Some beast of a tramp attacked me, and I beat him off."

"Yes; I see," he said, sinking deeper into his sea of helplessness and shame.

She made a movement; she was going.

"Let me walk down with you."

"No, thank you," she said curtly, and it was the last lash that she gave him.

Stretton stood there in the moonlight and watched her walk away. He noticed that she limped slightly, and he saw her pause and bend down to do something to her stockings. Every act of hers, every movement, was a thing of horror. He was glad when she had disappeared, and he had nothing before his eyes but the moon and the moonlit landscape, the scattered thorns and yews black against the sky. He became conscious of the beauty of the night, but it was a beauty that stung him and filled his throat with unbearable emotion. Beauty, yes, a beauty which she had poisoned.

And suddenly he felt himself alone. And what a loneliness! Never before had he felt himself so alone, so cut off, so hopeless an outcast. Even a woman was not safe when one of these rages came upon him. In a flash he realized all that this calamitous and tragic night implied, all that it denied to him, all the hope and the striving it had nullified.

He was overwhelmed. Not only was it a question of loneliness and of humiliation, but it seemed to him that the work of months had been wiped out in an hour. How happy he had been a week ago, three hours ago, happy in his confidence, in his knowledge of things well done. And now!

He remembered suddenly that he should have been at Romans Farm. He had completely forgotten it, but now he felt that he could not face the Viners, that he would never be able to face them, and that he would never believe in himself again. He was where he had been a year ago, only it seemed to him that his state was far worse, in that he had tried his inspired experiment and failed.

Would it have failed but for that girl?

He wandered blindly about the heath, cursing her. Almost he wished that he had killed her; the disaster would have been final, and the escape from it obvious, but now he had to go on living. But why should he go on living? Who wanted him to live?

Presently he returned towards the cottage, the place he called home. He saw the quaint and familiar outlines of the little house, and something seemed dead in it. He broke down and leant sobbing on the gate.

"Oh, mother, mother!" was his child's cry.

And then he straightened and raised his head.

"I cannot tell her," was his thought; "I can't tell anybody. I have got to bear it alone."

He grew calmer after that. It was as though his loneliness challenged him and he turned to face it as a man faces death, or something from which he cannot escape. His courage revived a little, even if it was the obstinate courage of despair. He looked full at the moon.

"Other men have had to face it," he thought, "and why not I? A man has to satisfy himself."

He swore to himself that he would face it.

"Yes, damn it, and alone!"

It was then that he heard a rustling in the hedge, and a dog's whimper. He was startled; he bent down; something rubbed against his legs and began to lick his caressing hand. He went down on his knees, with his head close to the ground, and let the dog lick his ears and wounded face, for this little beast's kisses soothed other and deeper wounds.

"I am not alone, not quite alone," he thought.

At Ottways a shocked and excited little man was preparing to go down to Willowmaston, and his daughter was trying to pacify him. She had attempted to slip up to her room unnoticed and had met her father on the stairs.

"But, my dear, the scoundrel must be caught. The police ought to be put on the track at once. Are you sure, quite sure, that you are all right?"

"Quite," she assured him. "I think the blackguard caught a tartar. An undersized tramp. He ran away."

"Can you describe him?"

“It was rather dark, but he had a beard and was wearing a battered old hat. A man of about forty. But look here, dad, I would rather no fuss were made. It is not a particularly pleasant adventure.”

Colonel Copredy agreed.

“I’ll say the man threatened you. Such blackguards are a public danger.”

She let him go on those terms, but no tramp or fillibuster was ever caught by the country police, and though there was some gossiping among the servants, the affair melted into the limbo of things forgotten. A week or so later Miss Isobel Copredy went to stay with friends in Scotland. She was not seen again in Ottways for close upon two months.

XVI

JINKS' PHILOSOPHY

THE only people who troubled to wonder why Stretton became a man who was almost invisible were Thomas Viner and his wife. He had sent them a note by the milk boy, apologizing for not coming down to supper and making some more or less plausible excuse, and there the matter might have ended had the Viners been less warm-hearted and less sensible folk.

It was Thomas Viner, too, who overheard young Rugglesworth telling his father that Stretton had been fighting.

"Scratched all over it be, 'is face, just as though the cat had clawed 'im."

Tom Viner did not meddle in the conversation, nor did he mention this piece of gossip even to his wife, but when a week had passed and they had not seen John Stretton, Viner went up one evening to the cottage.

When he was about a hundred yards from the place the farmer heard the sound of hammering. The sound came from the edge of the wood where Stretton was putting up his new outbuildings, and Viner could see him at work above the line of the old oak palings. He was on the roof of one of these buildings, nailing down the shingles.

Now work varies in temper, in speed, in precision of movement, and Viner—a great part of whose life had been spent in watching men work—knew the average man's rhythm, and whether spade, bill-hook or fork were moving as they should. Stretton was working as no ordinary man works. Viner saw that at once. Nor did Stretton's speed strike him as the haste of the amateur and the enthusiast, for the man on the roof of the shed was wielding the hammer as though he were fighting something. Nor were his blows too accurate. Old Viner saw him mishit sundry nails and bend them, so that they had to be wrenched out with the claw end of the hammer.

Stretton's back was towards him and he remained unaware of Tom Viner's presence until the farmer, who had come within a few yards of the shed, hailed him.

"Press of work, Mr. Stretton?"

Stretton turned sharply. He half lay on the roof, resting on his right side and propped on his right elbow.

“Hallo, it’s you, Mr. Viner.”

His face cleared, but Tom Viner’s first impression of it remained very vividly in his mind, for Stretton’s face had looked drawn and sombre and fierce. A man’s temper is judged by his eyes, the evil or the good that is in him, the peace of soul or the bitterness of spirit, and Stretton’s eyes were unhappy.

“So you are at those sheds,” said Viner; “we thought you must be busy with something.”

“I have been working pretty hard.”

“And late. It’s seven o’clock.”

His voice was easy and kind.

“Don’t you work too hard. It’s bad business.”

Stretton appeared to hesitate; he remained poised on the white timber against the dark foliage of the trees; then he made a movement towards the ladder and came down. Tom Viner noticed sundry red lines upon his face but without appearing to notice them.

“You are making quite a good job of that shed,” he observed.

“You think so?”

“I do. Why not knock off and come down and have some supper with us?”

He saw Stretton colour up.

“I’d like to, but I can’t manage it to-night. I am working to time.”

“I see.”

“May I come another night, say Saturday?”

“Of course.”

Viner pulled out his pipe. He was acutely aware of the other man’s uneasiness, of the driven look at the back of Stretton’s eyes, and he wondered what had caused it.

“You are working too hard,” he thought. “And why?”

Stretton had picked up his coat and was feeling in a pocket for pouch and matches.

“Come and look at my crops,” he said; “my tomatoes are ripening up well. I have been having a devil of a time with the weeds.”

His face grew vaguely irritable.

“Charlock, you know, and docks. I often wonder where the devil they all come from.”

“Well,” said old Viner soothingly, “don’t you let weeds worry you. It gives a man something to grumble at. Weeds have taught us a lot.”

But he went back home to Romans Farm, and over the supper table he talked to his wife.

“That lad’s not happy,” he said.

Mary Viner did not appear surprised, but she asked her man what made him think that John Stretton was unhappy.

“It’s his eves and the way I saw him working, working too hard and too fast.”

“Well, he would work like that, wouldn’t he?” said Mrs. Viner, “if he is unhappy. I know the feeling myself.”

She remembered how when the news of her son’s death in France had come to her she had found refuge in work, heavy and continuous work which had helped to dull the pain at her heart. She had set herself to clean down the whole house, and one night her man had found her sitting on the stairs in tears, overweary in body and soul. “Come to bed, mother.” Tom Viner remembered that too. Would he ever forget it?

“Yes, maybe it’s that,” he said. “But why?”

Mrs. Mary gave him a second helping of steak pie.

“Well, Tom, if you were a young man, living all alone, keeping your own house, how would you like it? And not a soul to speak to but that boob of a boy once in the day.”

“I shouldn’t like it at all,” said her man.

“Well, there you are! He got along all right for six months when everything was new. But now——”

Their eyes met across the table, kind, wise, mutually trustful eyes.

“Of course, that’s it.”

“He’s lonely, and he’s working like that to spite himself. He’s got character, you see.”

Tom Viner saw all that, but he thought that there was something more.

“The fact is,” he said slowly, “he wants a partner up there.”

“Say wife,” observed Mrs. Mary, “and have done with it. Not any ordinary sort of girl, either, I should say. He’s fine bred. Well, I don’t know.”

Again their eyes met across the table. The same thought was in the mind of each, but neither confessed it to the other. Perhaps they understood each other so well that there was no need for it to be confessed.

As a matter of fact, John Stretton was far more unhappy than the Viners suspected. We all have our descents into Hades, and never is hell so deep as when we have lost hope. Stretton had lost hope; that was what made life so damnable and so difficult, an eternal driving of himself along the road which he had chosen. He was afraid to stop, for stopping meant thinking, and he was afraid to think. Work had become a drug, the least dangerous of drugs with which unhappy men dull those cries of disillusionment and of pain. He slaved and sweated, but without any joy in it, sometimes hating it, doing things savagely and with set teeth. He overtired himself, and that meant irritability. Yet he told no one; his letters never breathed a word of it; they were rigorously censored by some obstinate spirit inside himself, the thing we call pride.

“Kill or cure!”

The saying had been a favourite one with one of his sergeants in France. “Kill or cure, boys. A ‘blighty’ or a number nine-sized halo—what!”

His mother and Car visited him about that time, but he was so sensitively secretive and had such a horror of whimpering that he deceived them both by putting on a temporary cheerfulness. His mother thought him a little thin and drawn, and said so.

“Work, mater, that’s all, and plenty of it.”

This finely drawn look suited him. There was an air of maturity about him, the mysterious something which suffering gives, and his mother’s sentimental eyes found him suggestive of romantic asceticism. He was like none of her other children. She had been unable to create a mystery about them, but John had always been a little mysterious.

“You must not work too hard, dear,” she said. “There must be so many beautiful thoughts coming to you in this sweet country.”

“Yes,” he agreed, “yes,” and smiled above and beyond her.

To Car he said very little. He showed him his new ground, his buildings and fences, and let these material things suggest that all was well.

“I have put in a lot of work here. I suppose I am fitter than I ever was in my life.”

But there was a little crease of pain and effort between his eyebrows which showed when he himself was not aware of it, and Car was observant.

“Look here, I am taking my holiday next month; Switzerland and Northern Italy. Why not join up with me?”

“Thanks, old man, but I have too much to do here.”

“Let it rip for a month.”

“I can’t,” said his brother; “it may seem to you like looking after a few cabbages and a dozen chickens, but it is my job.”

He clung instinctively to the life in and about Mascall’s Wood, and though there were many moments when he felt its futility, he blundered on with the stubborn silence of a peasant. There was more of the peasant in him than he knew, the blood that remains when all the froth of cities spills itself in the gutters. The gardener, the shepherd and the farmer cannot shrug off their responsibilities and surrender to silly moods of pique. They deal with life, not with mere machinery. They cannot go on strike against Nature because there is no rain or too much rain, or because their potatoes are blighted or the wheat has the rust. They may grumble but they carry on. They learn what the poor, crude mechanic with a little cheap information stuffed into his noddle takes so long to learn, even if he ever learns it, that life moves whether we wish it or not, and that we cannot stop it by touching a button or pulling a lever. We never get the results we dream of. Any gardener can tell you that. Life to us is approximate. Strike at Nature and she strikes back or ignores you in such a way that you and your silly machine are left to rust.

That is what his patch of soil taught John Stretton. It was not a question of his wanting to work; he had to work or confess himself a traitor to life and to growth. Young plants had to be watered, seeds sown, weeds kept under. Also he had to look ahead. He was at school in the fields and he was learning that essential and deep wisdom which man must learn in the sweat of his brain and his body.

About that time too Rollin Beal sent him a couple of books which were peculiarly applicable to his case and full of suggestive courage. They were the lives of Henri Fabre and Pasteur. They fascinated Stretton. Here were these two men of peasant stock carrying life up hill on their shoulders, toiling on with stubborn and passionate enthusiasm, facing injustice, prejudice and ridicule, becoming great with a quiet and unsensational greatness. Yet what could be more dramatic than some of Pasteur's triumphs? Stretton sat up at night reading the drama of those long experiments. He would go out on the heath, walk about and think. Never had men suggested more to him than these two most lovable Frenchmen. Their lives had been full to the brim, full and overflowing.

He was struck, thrilled by their faith.

"I do not believe in God," says Fabre, "I see him."

And Pasteur's death-bed! Was not the faith of such a man a deep intimation, part of the vast soul of life, beyond words, beyond refutation? They believed so deeply because for them life had been so deep.

"If we tread the shallows," he thought, "surely we remain shallow. Plunge out into the deeps."

These books suggested to him many things, things which concerned himself. There was the beyondness of growing cabbages, the secret life of a cabbage patch, of a field, of a wood. The trend of certain insect lives in their antagonism to man! The beneficent and malignant infinitely small! How many riddles were there for man to read! By patiently studying one small thing a man might be of more use to his fellows than whole cohorts of politicians and soldiers. Life was not sterile. It might seem sterile when your soul shrivelled and died.

Yet this was not all. He read in these men's lives of something that he lacked; those other tendernesses and devotions, comradeship, sympathy, and his lack of these things saddened him. Would they ever come to him; would he be in a position to claim them? He doubted it. That was why he continued to be unhappy.

"I want the big thing," he thought, "and that is the tragedy of it, because as life is with me at present I seem to have no right to the big thing. Little cheap adventures with any sort of girl are no use to me. I want something which lasts."

Sex, yes, but sex which had sanctity.

“That’s the irony of it. I might go up to town any day and pick up a “friend.” But the smell of the other men! No thanks! I think I should have to be a little drunk or very desperate for that.”

He was to be both, but neither were to take him street-walking.

So he carried on. He worked very hard, but after a while he ceased to feel the hardness of it. His interest began to return, but he did not grow any happier, and there were times when he asked himself what claim a man had on happiness. And what was happiness?

Yet the ironical part of it all was that the more he disciplined himself the more fierce became the occasional craving for vivid self-expression, and as his interest in the green life about him revived his own insistent self seemed to revive with it. He wanted to break out joyously, to love, laugh, and be tender, to do all those pleasant things which youth desires to do. It was natural, and he knew that it was natural. The suppressing of this naturalness was like strangling a child.

“I wish I had gone abroad with Car,” he thought.

As though a sojourning in Swiss and Italian hotels would have helped him! He realized the futility of the wish and laughed.

But this craving for vivid self-expression grew stronger, and being unsatisfied, it left him vulnerable. Every man has his heel of Achilles; we cannot mock at each other unless we practise the usual forms of social dishonesty, nor did Stretton realize how vulnerable he was until the thing had happened.

Down in Kingsbury one August afternoon he fell in with an old acquaintance, a fellow officer whom he had known early in the war, one Hubert Jinks, who had taken to farming. Jinks’ land lay south of Withyhurst, in the valley country at the foot of the chalk hills. He shepherded Stretton into the Mitre.

“Have a drink.”

That was his genial and unsubtle response to every question life asked him. If you were depressed, if you were merry, if you were to be married, if you had come back from burying your father, Jinks would be ready with his formula: “Have a drink.” It was so easily applied, so universally English, so democratic. It saved internal friction, and prevented the uncomfortable functionings of that other and more mysterious spirit.

But the good nature of the man was insidious. He was five-and-forty, with the pink face of a genial infant, and blue eyes which seemed to see nothing and everything. Yet he had a very definite attitude towards life; he was bibulous; he absorbed all impressions and reduced them to soft pulpiness. Nothing mattered very seriously. “What! Feeling a bit so-so? Have a drink.”

Stretton happened to be in a very deep pit of loneliness when this easy creature reached down a hand and pulled him out. They began to gossip, as men will, about old memories and old friends. “Remember Devil’s Dyke? That was a nice drain—what! Pea soup in your gum-boots all day! Those were times.” When they left the Mitre Jinks would have it that Stretton should come over at once, instantly, and see his little mud-patch. He ran a motor-bike and side-car and the side-car was available. Afterwards he would drive Stretton back to Mascall’s and return the call. “A little drink in my place and a little drink in yours. Sounds like musical comedy—what! Come along.”

Stretton remembered that he had not any whisky in the cottage. It seemed courteously necessary to play Echo to this good-natured soul, so he made a laugh of the matter and bought a bottle of Jinks’ philosophy. It was stowed away in the side-car, and they set off.

Jinks’ farm was known as “Chalkpits.” It was a comfortable and untidy place, full of dogs and faded cushions and empty bottles. Here Stretton was made known to Mrs. Jinks, a very big, yellow-headed, good-natured woman who wore a purple dress and white stockings, and who had no quarrel with her husband’s philosophy. She made Stretton very welcome, put him in the most comfortable chair, handed him the cigarette-box, and set a whisky-and-soda at his elbow without asking him whether he wanted it. It was a perpetual and unquestioned want at Chalkpits. Mrs. Jinks’ great art was the concocting of cocktails; she was supposed to know a hundred variations, and the sideboard made Stretton think of an American bar.

“It is a little quiet here,” she told him, “but Mr. Jinks is a whole chorus.”

He was. And he was one of the most sociable and kind-hearted of men, and he had no enemy, as we put it, but himself.

“Give his last drink away, he would.”

Jinks sat and chuckled and perspired.

“And she would wheedle a donkey’s head off,” he retorted; “but I like them that way, what!”

Stretton enjoyed himself, in fact he was astonished at his sudden light-heartedness in this world of alcohol and never mind. He found himself talking and laughing a great deal, and accepting a second drink. Meanwhile a thin young man with a facetious tongue who ran a stud farm somewhere over the hill dropped in and added to the joy of life. He lay in a chair with his beautifully gaitered legs spread out, and drawled anecdotes and stories. He was supremely funny; Mrs. Jinks laughed till she wept, and kept making excursions to the sideboard. Jinks' blue eyes grew bluer and more opaque, and his face was the face of an elderly cherub.

Presently Stretton remembered that he had to return home. He did not want to go, and he said so.

"Things to water, you know."

"Ever tried watering a vegetable marrow with old Scotch?" asked the breeder of horses.

"No."

"I did once. I found the thing growing in through the window at night and making for the water jug. Frightful head that plant had on it."

The motor-pram was brought out; the Jinkses called it the "pram" because they had no children.

"So long," said the lady, "drop in at any time and have a drink."

Jinks whisked Stretton over to Burnt Heath in thirty-five minutes. He seemed surprised at the smallness of the place, and all the more so because Stretton had told him that he owned most of the land and the houses near.

"Nice little dug-out," he said in his genial way; "but you won't get a wife in there, my boy! Well, what about it?"

This was the recognized challenge, and Stretton produced his bottle of whisky.

"Help yourself, old man."

Jinks helped them both, and generously.

"Here's luck."

He bumped off over the heath about half an hour later, leaving John Stretton with a feeling of absurd light-heartedness and that bottle of whisky. Which is one's quarrel with these genial people, they do not discriminate; every man is just a jug and a bottle.

XVII

STRETTON MEETS JESSIE VINER

IN the "Arabian Nights" we read of the evil genius imprisoned in a bottle, of how he terrified and threatened his liberator, and of how the wise mortal persuaded him back into the bottle, closed it and threw the bottle back into the sea. In John Stretton's case the action lasted a little more than a week, from the time that the Jinks' philosophy made its first insidious advances to the evening when Stretton performed that symbolical act and threw bottle and genius into his rubbish pit.

That a man should be afraid of a bottle or should fight a bottle seems absurd, yet the thing stood on Stretton's oak dresser and whispered to him, argued with him, tempted him until he began to pay it certain courtesies. Yet all through the week a sense of resistance was there, a healthy and insurgent pride which refused to surrender. "What is the harm?" said the thing on the dresser. "If you are feeling a little depressed, come to me just once or twice a day. Moderation, you know. We shall soon get to understand each other." It was the voice of Jinks and all that Jinks stood for. "Have a drink, old man. Why bother? What does anything matter so long as you feel warm and happy inside?"

For two days Stretton did not touch the thing. On the third day he had one small drink, on the next day two. On the fourth day he stood out and refused to be persuaded. On the fifth day he talked with the thing three times. On the sixth day, being down at Kingsbury, he bought more of Jinks' nepenthe, and, returning home to his loneliness, listened so attentively to the spirit's voice that it grew bold and spoke the naked truth to him, and the evil face of it was uncovered. That night he slept hardly at all. He was aware of an inward and spiritual shuddering, a fastidious disgust, a horror of what might be. He realized that it was impossible for a man who was lonely and unhappy to argue with such an inclination. Like the proverbial woman, it would always have the last word, and that word would be sweet and alluring. In rough and ready parlance, his manhood gave him the order —"Bundle the baggage out of the house and shut the door on her." And that was what he did.

By some mischievous coincidence Hubert Jinks and his wife drove over on that day, and Stretton, hearing the machine panting up over the heath, ran into the cottage and hid the whisky bottles. He realized that the rejection of

Jinks' philosophy implied the rejection of Jinks and all that Jinks represented. Blotting paper has but one function; it absorbs.

He had to ask them into the cottage, and, as it was about four o'clock, he suggested that they should stay to tea. Norah Jinks, in yellow, and overflowing like a golden rose, was playful and coy, though she was far too stout for such whimsies. She offered to help Stretton in the kitchen.

"But don't you bother about tea for us. A little drink won't do us any harm."

Stretton, standing very stiffly in the doorway, explained that he had no whisky in the house. He was sorry, but it would have to be tea.

"Right-ho," said the philosopher; "but make it weak, old man."

While Stretton was busy in the kitchen Mrs. Norah, exploring Stretton's sitting-room as women of certain mental coarseness will, opened the doors of the oak dresser and saw what Stretton had hidden. She lifted out one of the bottles, and showing it to her husband replaced it and reclosed the doors. Her round, red face altered its expression. She had discovered a liar and a mean liar, and meanness was not included in the Jinks' philosophy.

Stretton was aware of a suggestive chilliness when he brought in the tea. They drank each one cup, and talked very formally about nothing in particular, and after tea they deserted him with awkward abruptness. He was puzzled. He could only conclude that they resented the absence of more generous liquor.

"Well, that's a mean sort of skunk," said the lady, as her man manœuvred the machine along the grass track; "I would not have minded so much if he hadn't lied about it."

Jinks looked grieved.

"Perhaps he can't afford the stuff."

"That's all very fine, but he can afford to mop it himself. And he had three at our place. I've no use for that kind of man."

For which blessing Stretton may have had cause to be thankful. Anyway, the coming of the Jinkses sealed his decision, for he took those bottles, threw them into his rubbish pit and smashed them with the heel end of his axe.

His victory in that somewhat sinister struggle filled him with a sense of relief and a consciousness of new spiritual independence. For strengthening

the heart physicians have ordered hill climbing, and man can discover an infinite number of hills to climb, but Stretton could not help reflecting that there are an infinite number of people who are ready to tug at a man's coat-tails. "Don't worry. Don't be one of those uncomfortable people with a jack-in-the-box saint inside you. Have a drink." He was not a prig, and he certainly was no saint. He mistrusted saintliness, but he did believe in being clean and wholesome.

As he wandered through his woods late on that September afternoon he guessed that he would not see the Jinkses again; he had buried them and their motive force in that pit. He was not sorry. They had stormed his reserve by taking advantage of his loneliness; quite innocently, no doubt, but how dangerous to other people innocence can be. He sat down in the fern and looked at the sky beyond the tops of his trees. Here and there he noticed a fern frond which showed autumn's incipient gold, and the thought of autumn opened the door to winter.

He found himself vaguely afraid of the winter. Growth would have ceased, the days would be short and stagnant. It would rain, perhaps day after day; there would be the wind in the trees, a perilous melancholy. And the long evenings, with the daylight fading at four o'clock! Five hours of darkness or lamplight before a man could think of going to bed! What was he going to do with himself on those winter evenings, night after night? Read and smoke and stir the fire? How was he to keep the moth of boredom out of the grey tissue of his brain?

He would go down and see the Viners.

Yes, but he could not thrust himself on them night after night.

And then it seemed to Stretton that he might shut up his cottage during the winter and live at Romans Farm. The Viners might be willing to take him in as a paying guest; he would be away all day working at his new buildings and on his land. His loneliness leapt at the idea, for it was afraid of itself as a child may be afraid of the darkness.

He remembered that he had not visited Romans Farm for several days, and he decided to go down and see the Viners. He would broach the question to them cautiously. He had more than a suspicion that they would agree.

So, on that September evening, he wandered down over the heath with the black spaniel at his heels, not suspecting that this was to be the most vivid night of the year, and that he was walking through light towards the greatest of mysteries. The sunset was behind him. He remembered

afterwards, as he remembered everything connected with that evening, the soft brilliance of the landscape, its colour, its almost supernatural beauty. It lived in one of its golden moments, even as he was to live through one of his. The far hills smoked. There was a smell of dew, a suggestion of white mist rising in the valleys; the rusty heather shone like bronze; the green of the woods had ceased to be the heavy, languid green of summer. He saw masses of ragwort in bloom, and scabious purpling the grass. The birches were tremulous with gold. He remembered, too, that the old thorns were red with a multitude of berries.

He pushed upon the white gate and walked down the farm lane. He met no one, but heard a robin singing. The old house was still warmed by the sunlight, and he saw the long shadows streaking the orchard grass. Pausing by the white-slatted fence he fastened the lead to Paul's collar and tied the dog to the fence, as was his custom. He noticed an open lattice, and that one of the curtains moved, although there was no wind to move it. A moment later he was standing in the porch and pulling the chain of the bell.

Stretton had turned and was looking out across the broad valley towards hills which were turning purple when he heard footsteps crossing the stonepaved hall. He had stood so often in the Viners' porch waiting for Mrs. Rugglesworth to open the door to him that he expected her swarthy, broad-nosed face with its moles and its flat brown eyes, and to hear her silly sing-song voice say: "Won't you step inside, sir?" But it did not happen that way. The door opened and he saw a girl, and the girl was Jessie Viner.

They stood looking at each other in silence, each registering some swift and vivid impression. Then Stretton pulled off his hat.

"I beg your pardon. Is it Miss Viner?"

"Yes," she said, "it is."

She smiled. From their very first glimpse of him her eyes were friendly, and she liked him even better when she saw him without his hat. Life is like that, sudden yet deep, when two people who are fated to meet look for the first time into each other's eyes.

"I have come down to see your father."

"It is Mr. Stretton?"

"Yes."

One of his earliest impressions was of surprise at finding her so unlike the photograph which Mrs. Viner kept upon the mantelpiece, and he was

conscious of pleasure in this feeling of surprise. The girl of the photograph was thin and immature; the girl in the doorway showed all the comeliness of her youth's maturity. She had dark brown hair. Her face was round and rather pale, but with a beautiful and healthy cream-like pallor. Her eyes made him think of black velvet. She smiled easily, but not too easily, for the real smile of her eyes was a very wonderful thing, and went out only to the few.

"Mother and father have driven down to Kingsbury. Won't you come in and wait?"

"May I?"

"Of course. They will be back for supper."

Her invitation struck him as being gently impersonal. She was easy and natural and smooth as silk. She gave him the impression of soft curves, of a body and temperament happily rounded, without flatness and without edges. And yet he was conscious of feeling strangely and inexplicably shy.

"I did not know that you had come back to Romans Farm."

She glanced at him over her shoulder as she led the way to the sitting-room.

"I came back yesterday. I have been with my sister, helping her."

"And you are home for good?"

"Yes, for good."

He gathered yet another impression of her—that she was glad to be back in this old place, and that she found it neither dull nor lonely. Her voice was low and soft, without any of the silliness which spoils so many country voices. She spoke slowly, which is a pleasant and restful thing in a woman. But chiefly Stretton was aware of the difference her presence here would make to him; he began to realize it as he entered the familiar room and felt it strangely full of her.

She took a chair by the window, while he remained standing on the hearthrug. He understood now why the curtain had moved; she had been sitting there when he had tied the dog to the fence. He saw a workbasket on another chair, and something white hidden under the half-closed lid. He guessed what that thing was, and the lace edge of that frock gave him a new presentation of her as the woman.

"Won't you smoke?"

He said that he did not want to smoke, and a moment later she caught him in the act of looking at that photograph of herself that had been taken ten years ago. She felt that his eyes were comparing her with the past, and that the comparison was in favour of the present.

"Yes, I really was like that!" And she laughed.

He coloured up. His shyness touched her, for it was something more than shyness.

"I should not have known you," he said.

She felt so sure of him now in her intuitive grasp of what he was that she opened the lid of her workbasket and resumed her work. She was like her mother in that she was not always questioning life or finding creases in the garment of herself and trying to straighten them out; and from her father she had inherited her slow and pleasant leisureliness of speech. She radiated tranquillity, but her tranquillity had depths and character.

"I am glad to be back here," she told him.

He took old Viner's chair and talked to her while she sat and sewed at the window. The light began to fade and she bent her head nearer to her work, and while they talked he began to see her completely and with little spasms of wonder and mysterious delight. She was so much at ease that it was easy for him to paint himself a picture of her on the canvas of his mind. His most vivid impression was one of shapeliness, a certain gracious richness and depth in bosom, throat and shoulders. Her nose was short, rounded at the tip—a mischievous yet sensitive nose. Her mouth was rather long, with firm full lips closing without effort over strong white teeth. Her shapely and rounded head was set on a short, full neck, her hair gathering low over the nape of it and almost touching the loose collar of her white blouse. Her hands delighted him; they were such leisurely, pleasant, capable hands, neither too plump nor too thin.

"So you and father are quite old friends. I heard about you in mother's letters."

Stretton wondered how much she knew. He found himself wishing that there was nothing for her to know. Her eyes met his from time to time; deep, frank eyes which looked at him kindly and made him glad that there were certain things in life which he had not done. He told her that Thomas and Mary Viner had been very kind to him—extraordinarily kind.

"I'm glad," she said.

She looked across at him with one of her quick smiles.

“And that sounds as though I were agreeably surprised by their kindness! But I have never found anybody quite so kind in the way that really matters. So much kindness is just for show.”

“One of the business virtues!”

She laughed.

“Yes, just that.”

The light was fading so fast that she had to put her work away, but she seemed to have no wish to light the lamp. They sat in the dusk and talked, and sometimes she would sit and listen for a moment for the sound of wheels in the lane; yet these silences were mere pauses in the flow of their words, utterly without constraint or with any suggestion of self-consciousness on her part.

“They are late,” she would say. “Mother must have been buying a new rug!”

“Why should it be your mother? I have seen men absorbed in shop windows!”

“Oh, it is not favouritism! I know what father’s shopping is like. He walks into the shop and says: ‘I want a collar, size sixteen,’ and takes the first they give him.”

“Isn’t that rather lovable?”

“Perhaps. But he is lovable. You know, Mr. Stretton, it is always the woman who has to sew on the buttons.”

They laughed, but in that laughter and in the words which had provoked it he glimpsed another aspect of her, and in it a vein of humorous wisdom, like a blue vein seen in the white skin of a comely shoulder.

She raised a hand.

“Listen!”

They heard the pony cart in the lane, and going out together they met Thomas and Mary Viner by the white gate. Viner held the reins, and the bottom of the governess cart was full of parcels and ironmongery, the handles of two new brooms protruding against the dashboard. Mrs. Viner’s purchases had included a new zinc bath, and to save space she had sat with her feet in it.

“Well, here you are! Mr. Stretton came down and we introduced ourselves to each other. I made him stay.”

“Quite right,” said her father.

Mrs. Viner looked tired. She did not join in the laughter, and Stretton thought her unusually reserved.

“Well, you are cluttered up!”

“Help us out, Jess, will you? We are like a travelling tinker’s van.”

Stretton turned to and gave a hand, extracting the galvanized bath from under Mrs. Viner’s feet and carrying off the brooms.

“I did not know that your daughter was here,” he said to her.

Mary Viner gave him one quick and baffling look.

“No? You will stay and have some supper, Mr. Stretton?”

Her voice was more formal than usual, and even her kindness had taken a note of reserve, and for the moment Stretton was puzzled by it; but then he remembered how Jessie Viner’s presence had changed his own attitude towards the life of Romans Farm, and he understood that a mother’s eyes might look at him differently now that the house held more than two elderly people.

He felt an inward shrinking, a quick and sensitive withdrawing of himself.

“Thank you, but I must be getting back.”

She would not hear of it, and she had her reasons.

“Nonsense! Come in, Mr. Stretton. It is all cold stuff, but you won’t mind that.”

He surrendered to her, but all through the meal he was reserved and ill at ease. He would not let himself look at Jessie Viner, for he had a feeling that Mary Viner’s eyes were watching him.

“She knows,” he thought; “it is different here now.”

When the meal was over he made some unconvincing excuse and said good night to them, almost ignoring old Viner’s suggestion that he should stay and smoke a pipe.

“No, I really must get back.”

They let him go, and half an hour later Jess heard a dog whimpering outside the house. Stretton had gone off, completely forgetting the spaniel that he had left fastened to the fence. Jess brought the dog in, and he spent the night at Romans Farm, but no one in the house made any comment on Stretton's forgetfulness, though the inference had been obvious to them all.

XVIII

NEXT DAY

WHEN he reached his own gate John Stretton turned back on to the heath and stood looking down towards Romans Farm. He could see a solitary light shining among the trees, and he sat down in a clump of heather and watched that light as though he were some watcher of the heavens and had discovered a new star.

He remembered why he had gone to Romans Farm, and in remembering it realized that his plan to take refuge there during the winter had become impossible.

"She has changed all that," he thought.

He rested his elbows on his knees and pressed his hands over his eyes, yet when he shut out the very semblance of things visible his inward vision became more vivid and distracting. He felt that he was full of tremulous and exultant light. Why had it happened? How had it happened? The suddenness of it! Yet was not the very suddenness of it passionately convincing; and so natural that his whole consciousness accepted it as a man's eyes accept the light? Three hours ago she had been no more than a name to him, without glamour, without meaning. He had wandered down there to where the light shone and she had stepped forward into his life, and now nothing else seemed to matter.

"Jess," he said to himself, "Jessie Viner."

After all, what was she? A country girl, pleasant, well grown, comely, a creature of beautiful curves, with dark eyes and a happy smile? No, she was more than that, and he knew it, realized it with passionate exultation and with pain. He wanted her; he feared her; he marvelled at her. No other woman had ever come to him like this, quietly walking into his life and filling it with sudden wonder, a sense of inexplicable tenderness and mystery. She was the woman for whom the soul of him had waited. She was the woman who would say the things which no other woman could say.

He was conscious of a sense of fatality.

"Dear God!" he thought; "and I am what I am!"

He covered his eyes again; he felt a trembling, a breathlessness within him.

"How can I go there again? I must go there again."

A drowning man's vision is said to be retrospective, but Stretton's vision in that moment of the great plunge into the deep waters of emotion looked forward as well as back. He saw himself as a thing that was not normal, an undependable creature caged off from a possible mate. He was obsessed by a sense of his own abnormality; it had grown very strong in him since that affair of Isobel Copredy's, and now in this moment of emotion it stood before him like an angel with a flaming sword.

"Turn back!"

He became aware of the conflicting cries within himself.

"But how can it matter? It is nothing to her. But to me, just the sight of her! Yes, you fool, and you will drink to forget what cannot be forgotten. No, don't use words or think thoughts like that. She is different; she is not to be thought of in that way. Why did she come back? I wish to God she had stayed away. No, I wish nothing of the kind. It is nobody's fault; it has just happened."

He remembered that he had to go to bed, but he had no appetite for sleep. He felt that he wanted to be out all night here in the heather which was wet with the September dew, and think of her and the sudden wonder of her. In fact, he did remain there till midnight, long after that solitary light among the trees had been quenched. The night breathed quietly and smelt sweet, and he loitered awhile in the garden before entering the cottage.

He had left a candle on the sitting-room table, and as he struck a light he called the dog.

"Paul, old man, Paul!"

The lapse was suddenly remembered; he had left the dog fastened to Viner's fence! It was too late now to go back, and it was more than probable that Paul had been rescued and taken into the house. But what would they think of a man who went away and forgot his dog?

He could not help breaking into a short and half-ironical laugh.

"Why, it is the most subtle compliment I could have paid her!"

After that he went to bed, leaving his blind up so that he could see the stars. He may have spoken her name, for the sound of it was oracular, and

presently he fell asleep and dreamed of nothing that mattered.

Stretton woke soon after the sunrise. It was a clear September morning, and he returned to the sense of familiar things, the outline of the window, the furniture, the rose-coloured walls cut by the slope of the roof. The sun was painting a blur of gold on the wall just above the fireplace, and that patch of light was there each morning to tell him whether the sky was clear or overcast.

He lay and looked at the window, conscious of the familiar room, and yet knowing that everything seemed different. It was full of another presence, an imagined presence, the reality of Jessie Viner. It came to him with a little spasm of wonder and of pain.

He left his bed and, going to the window, looked towards Romans Farm, and he saw it through a shimmer of sunlight and in the dew of a perfect morning. The landscape had an indescribable softness, and so wonderful was it that he wondered whether the magic was in the landscape or in himself, and yet the longer he looked the sadder grew his thoughts. Not only was he alone, but his loneliness was to be mocked by a new desire, by moments of exultation, yearning and fear.

"Surely," he thought, "life can be hard and ironical. And yet, even now, there are things for which I am glad. I am glad that I threw that stuff away yesterday. I am glad that I did not fall to that other woman. And, after all, this may be nothing more than a mid-summer madness."

He went and had his cold bath, and in the midst of it, while he was sluicing water over his head, he found himself quaintly and humanly involved in self-analysis.

"I wonder what the real I in me is like? I wonder what she thought of me?"

He wrung out the sponge and tossed it into the rack.

"I don't suppose she thought about me at all. Why should she?"

Meanwhile, at Romans Farm, the woman of his thoughts was sitting up in bed with her elbows on her knees, and her two hands laid along her cheeks. Her brown hair was tucked away under a little lace cap, one of those fastidious and modern flimsies which Mary Viner scoffed at and yet admired. It suited Jess, and as the mother said to herself: "Why shouldn't my girl wear one? She looks so pretty in it." Which was the soundest of arguments that a mother could use. The dawn was not very old, and Jess was allowing herself a ten minutes' reverie, with the sun setting a mark of gold

upon her bedroom wall even as it marked John Stretton's. And if the thoughts of the man were reaching out to her, hers were a fainter echo of them with interest and a vague pity for their inspiration. Love had not come suddenly to the woman as it had come to the man.

For the rest she felt good, and happy to be at home. She loved the farm, the house, this little room of hers which was so much her own. In a moment of enthusiasm two years ago she had tied a duster over her head, wrapped herself in an old overall and distempered the walls a soft blush pink. The curtains of white cretonne, flowered with tiny red roses, she had made herself. The carpet was a plain green cord, with the old boards stained round it. As for the furniture, she had picked it up piece by piece in Kingsbury, an early nineteenth-century mahogany chest of drawers, a mahogany wig table for a dressing-table with a Georgian swing-glass upon it, a mahogany washstand with blue and white Spode jug and basin. An eighteenth-century labourer's oak clothes-chest stood under the window, and a cushion on it improvised a window-seat. For her dresses she had a hanging cupboard with a green curtain, and this she had made for herself. The bed was Early Victorian, but she slept in it none the worse for that.

Jess had no pictures in the room, but a few books, and they were naïve books, not at all modern, and suggesting the romantic and the practical. She possessed a healthy appetite for romance, though she had grown beyond believing in it too easily. She had a quite Victorian passion for the many and various things which a woman does in the house, the kitchen, and the garden. It was no virtue. She happened to be made that way, and if she thought about it at all she was glad that she had been made that way. She had a right view of things, and a very sensitive intuition. According to the mystics she had lived before and often. She seemed to know all that the cruder, younger souls have yet to learn.

Jessie's reverie was interrupted by the barking of a dog, Stretton's black spaniel shut up amid unfamiliar surroundings, and uttering a sentimental protest. She pushed back the clothes and slipped out of bed, took off her lace cap, shook her hair free, and looked at herself in the mirror.

"Yes, I have changed in ten years," she thought; "he noticed that—but he forgot his dog!"

She smiled, and her reflection smiled back at her.

"What made him so shy, not to begin with, but afterwards? After they came back. I don't think he looked at me again. Most men are not like that."

The dog continued to bark, so she put on a dressing-gown, slipped her feet into a pair of slippers and went downstairs. Paul accepted her and his release at her hands with affectionate enthusiasm. She took him upstairs with her to her room, and he lay down in a patch of sunlight and watched her dress and do her hair.

Later, he was taken in to breakfast, and provoked a series of comments as he sat on the hearthrug and wagged a stumpy tail.

"Hallo, Mr. Stretton's dog!" said Thomas Viner, coming in from the fields with the dew on his boots.

His wife had made a similar remark, but it had been less exclamatory and more subtle.

"What, doggie, you here! It's a queer world, isn't it?"

Paul attached himself to Thomas Viner and sat by his chair and begged. He behaved as he behaved at home, not realizing that he was provoking curiosity and various suggestive thoughts in the minds of the three people sitting round the breakfast table. Thomas Viner gave him two or three small pieces of cold bacon, looking down at him the while with that tolerant and out-of-door smile.

"You ought to have gone up with the milk, my lad."

"I will send Sam up with him later," said his wife.

Jess remained silent. She knew that her mother had some serious reason for making this suggestion. Women are quick to feel such things.

When breakfast was over, Tom Viner lit his pipe and went down to the farmyard, and mother and daughter were left alone together. Each knew that Stretton's dog had raised a point of issue between them, and Jess, going for a tray, busied herself with clearing the breakfast table. Her mother had opened the cupboard where she kept her work and had taken out a couple of pillow slips which needed mending. She spread them over her knees and examined them, as though life held nothing more serious than the darning of linen.

"There ought to be a letter from Rachel to-day. She must be missing you, Jess."

Jess carried out the tray, returned and closed the door. She went and stood by the window.

"It is good to be back. Rachel will miss me less than you think."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Viner, raising her eyes.

“When you have a man, two children and a home.”

“I suppose she is happy?”

“That is why she won’t miss me much, mother. It is the lonely people who miss us.”

There was a short silence while Mrs. Viner selected a needle and thread. Paul was pretending to be asleep, but he kept one eye open.

“Well, Mr. Stretton did not miss his dog.”

Jess leant her hands on the window-sill.

“So—he is lonely. There are other sorts of loneliness.”

“That’s so,” said her mother, with the air of a woman who did not mean to say too much.

“I suppose there are reasons,” she added a moment later, since Jess remained silent and absorbed.

Of course there were reasons. A young man did not bury himself in the country and live the life of a squatter without having some very good reason for doing it, and Jess was interested, but she had no intention of making her interest too obvious.

“He was badly wounded in the war, was he not?”

“I understand so,” said her mother; “but I don’t ask questions.”

“I know. In one of your letters you said something about him being a mystery.”

“Did I? I have forgotten it. I haven’t found any mystery in him. I have left my scissor-case in the cupboard, dear; you might get it for me.”

Jess brought the case of scissors, and understanding that her mother had some reason for not wishing to discuss John Stretton with her, she dropped the subject, knowing that when Mrs. Mary was obstinate she would continue so just as long as the motive which justified her obstinacy remained. For Mary Viner was no fool. She knew that by making a mystery of a man you might make him interesting, and she was not quite sure that she wanted Jess to be interested in John Stretton. She liked the man very well, for he was peculiarly lovable, but after all there was a mystery, though what it was she did not know.

Paul was returned by Sam Rugglesworth about the middle of the morning. He had found Stretton at work upon his new buildings.

“I’ve brought your dog,” was all he said.

Sam might be stupid and completely lacking in manners, but he came from Romans Farm.

“Thanks. I’m sorry you have had the trouble.”

He threw Sam half a crown, and at the sight of the silver the lad discovered some elements of courtesy.

“It wasn’t no trouble, sir. Miss Jessie told me to say how he’d had his breakfast.”

“Please thank Miss Viner for me.”

“I will,” said Sam, adding the unvoiced reflection, “If I were you I’d go and do it myself.”

Nor was Mr. Stretton deaf to the persuasiveness of so obvious an excuse. It cajoled him all day, while he was working, while he was eating, and the voice was the voice of his own heart. He discovered a dozen reasons why he should go down to Romans Farm, but he was faced by the one great reason why he should not go. Yet, man learned to feel before he learned to reason, and no amount of logic can stifle the most human of all desires.

At six o’clock, when Stretton had finished his work for the day, he changed his clothes, for there is an element of self-discipline in the changing of clothes when they will not be seen by any particular person. He had decided not to go to Romans Farm, but he allowed himself a ramble over the heath. In changing his clothes he had put himself in the way of changing his mind, for even when a man makes a decision he may have prepared the alternative, and the very making of a decision postulates a possible change of mind. So it was with Stretton. His “I’ll not go” became “I’ll go.”

But his vacillation did not end here. He walked down through the cool sunlight of a September evening as far as the white gate at the end of the lane, and here he hesitated and temporized, leaning his elbows on the top bar. He looked along the grassy track furrowed with its wheel tracks and its central path kept worn by the feet of horses and of men. Two shaggy thorn hedges shut it in like two impending green waves. It seemed so absurd and easy an adventure to walk down that farm lane, but Stretton found that he could not face it.

Once, indeed, he did open the gate, and held it open for a moment with a tentative, uncertain hand. Presently he closed it again with a guilty

carefulness, as though someone might hear the click of the catch, and walked hurriedly away.

Yet someone had seen him, even Jessie Viner herself wandering round the farm in the freshness of the evening. She had been standing less than twenty yards away in the angle of one of the old hedges. There was a thin place here through which she had been able to see the gate, and Stretton had not discovered her, for she had remained quite still.

Both his purpose and his hesitation had been obvious to Jess, but his ultimate decision had left her surprised and wondering. Men can be shy creatures at times, and if she set his panic flight down to shyness, she had to account for his shyness. She did account for it, or rather, her intuition leaped to the inevitable and most natural interpretation of this shadow show.

“Is he frightened of me?”

It was not egotism that prompted the suspicion, for she returned to the farm and said nothing of what she had seen. She was sensitive, which meant that her reticence respected the man and in respecting him drew subtly nearer.

XIX

THE ROAD FROM KINGSBURY

SOME time later Stretton's second-hand bicycle grew suddenly tired of life within a mile of Kingsbury town. Its pedals revolved, but the sprocket wheel had come adrift on the back axle and Stretton completed the last mile on foot.

The man at the cycle shop to which he took the machine told Stretton that he could not repair the machine for two or three days, and suggested that he should hire a substitute. It was the most natural and sensible of suggestions, but it ran counter to one of those sudden whims which enter the head of a man who is out of tune with life.

"No, don't bother; I'll walk."

"Just as you like, sir."

"I'll call for the machine next week."

He had shopping to do in Kingsbury, and he proposed having tea in the old walled garden of the Mitre, where he could sit under one of the lime trees on the edge of what had been the bowling green and watch the pigeons on the brown roof of the Mitre stables. These expeditions to the old Georgian town took him out of himself. He went back a hundred years. He imagined men in smocks and great teams of horses musical with bells. Even in the Mitre garden he could fancy the smooth turf pressed by the buckled shoes of men in wigs and coloured coats, bluff, noisy men whose faces were red and whose mouths were full of strange oaths. Their voices rang loud; they quarrelled easily and with sheer animal zest; yet Stretton did not mind their imagined quarrelling. Up on Burnt Heath life was lonely and difficult and introspective, and the sturdy ghosts who haunted the Mitre were rough, and fluent, and direct. Sometimes he had more sentimental visions of an arch face under a mob cap looking out of a window under one of the gables, or of someone in a flowered gown and cross-laced shoes walking in the shade of the lime trees.

He bought his tobacco, a new briar pipe, a few books, two pairs of bootlaces, a spirit-level and a new chisel, and with his purchases stowed away in his brown haversack he walked to the Mitre.

"Can I have some tea, please, in the garden?"

Yes, he could have tea in the garden.

There were two ways into the Mitre garden, one by a passage leading past the bar, the other through a door opening through the wall of the coaching yard, and as Stretton thought that he had noticed Jinks' check riding breeches and canvas gaiters in the bar, he chose the way through the yard. A motor bicycle and side-car stood in the yard, and a woman was bending over the side-car, stowing away a variety of parcels. Her gaily voluminous figure and brazen head were familiar to Stretton, but it was too late for him to turn back.

She happened to raise her head, and he put up his hand to his hat. The gesture was superfluous, and awkwardly so. Her blue eyes simply did not recognize him; never had he blundered against such unembarrassed and intentional blindness.

He walked on.

"What on earth have I done?" he thought.

Yet the sensitive vase always suffers the more in a clash than the common pot. That Jinks' wife should have cut him was in the nature of things a matter of no consequence, and yet it annoyed him and rubbed the raw of his self-consciousness. He was growing far too self-conscious and he was well aware of the fact.

"Some people are too sensitive to live," he reflected.

But the incident bothered him all through his tea, and drove away the Georgian peace of the inn garden, though had he troubled to visualize the Georgian life of the Mitre in its relation to the present, he would have seen it to be full of Jinkses, loud, insensitive men and their loud and insensitive women. The type persists, or rather, it reincarnates. In the old days it used strange oaths, guzzled, drank, built solid and often beautiful houses, had no false reverence for women, was good-natured, quarrelsome, hoggish. The Jinkses with their drink-philosophy, their blatant motor-bike, their stout insensitiveness, were Neo-Georgians. They pushed in a crowd and were hardly aware of being pushed. They loved a musical comedy with plenty of leg and innuendo. They were part of the great lapse, the back—wash which perhaps is inevitable after some great national effort.

"But how have I offended the woman?"

Absurd though it was he could not throw the thing off, and he sat there bothering his sensitive head with the offendedness of a fat, flavicomous woman. The right explanation never occurred to him. One does not credit a

woman with poking into one's private cupboard and discovering imaginary stinginesses. To the finer mind the cult of the petty and the meanly obvious is never quite understandable.

But for Stretton the day was to be one of confusing coincidences, and when he set out from Kingsbury on his long tramp to Burnt Heath he was not in the happiest of tempers. He did not want to meet people; he resented the idea of meeting people, and if he could have made himself invisible he would have used that power and used it with a sense of relief. He went up out of Kingsbury with long, restless strides, and with that stag-like poise of the head which had so struck Rollin Beal. He had the sun behind him, and as he swung along the sandy road all the pomp and the magnificence of a golden autumn came down to meet him, and it left him cold. He was in a mood which refused to respond to the mystic symbolism of Nature. Chemical changes in the pigment of the leaves! Autumnal glories! A few long scientific words! He was unpleasantly wide awake.

He avoided Willowmaston by taking a field path which brought him out into the long avenue of beeches above Willowmaston village, and he slogged along up the hill under canopies of green and amber. He felt impenetrable and rather hot, for it was a warm and moist autumnal day. His eyes did not lift to the beauty of the foliage above him, the avenue might have been a tunnel of brass, and its wonderful lights glanced off his consciousness without effect. If it made him think of anything at all it made him think of Mrs. Jinks' yellow head.

Half-way up the avenue Stretton began to be overtaken by the sound of a briskly trotting pony. He did not look round, but shortened his stride to let the driver pass him more quickly, and when the sound was close on his heels he drew to the edge of the road. A black pony, scenting stable and supper, was taking the long slope as though there were no slope at all, but when he came abreast of Stretton, a hand tightened on the reins and pulled him up.

"Can I give you a lift?"

Stretton's eyes were on the same level as Jessie Viner's eyes as she sat in the governess cart. His hand went to his hat. He looked embarrassed, almost sulkily so.

"Thanks very much."

He could not tell her that he would prefer to walk, for though one part of him might have chosen the hard road, there was another part of him that

wanted to drive with her. The two impulses quarrelled within him, and made this difficult young man still more difficult.

"Are you sure you have room?"

She smiled aside the absurd suggestion.

"Plenty. My shopping has not been very serious."

He moved round to the back of the trap, and she leant over and turned the handle of the door.

"I can save you three miles."

He got in and sat down opposite her.

"My bicycle broke down."

It was obvious to her that he had never sat in such a conveyance before, and that he was fiercely shy.

"Do you mind sitting a little more forward. We shall balance better."

He moved, and one of his knees touched hers.

"Sorry. How's that?"

"Much better."

She saw that his face had flushed up, and that he looked annoyed with himself on account of his awkwardness. A few moments ago she had been watching his figure swinging along ahead of her, and there had been no awkwardness about him then, in fact she had been pleasantly aware of his long litheness, his hollow loins, his compact shoulders and well-set head. He moved well. But now he was all self-consciousness, or rather, he was supremely conscious of her.

"Market day for you?" she asked.

He stared past and beyond her.

"Tobacco and a book or two. I go down about once a fortnight. Rather a pleasant old place, Kingsbury."

"It is," she agreed.

And then there was a silence, quite a lengthy and embarrassing silence. The pony, either because he was discouraged by Stretton's additional weight or because the silence lay heavy on him also, showed a disinclination to trot, and Jessie Viner did not interfere with him. The trap went slowly up the road under the beech trees, and Stretton found nothing to say.

He was too much aware of her, painfully aware of her, of how she looked and of what she wore. It was probable that he had passed a dozen young women in the streets of Kingsbury and he could not have sworn to the colour of the skirt worn by any one of them. With Jessie Viner it was different. Every detail of her, her big black hat, her white woollen coat striped with blue at the hips and wrists, her dark brown skirt, her plump and pleasant hands, impressed themselves upon the sensitive surface of his consciousness. He knew the exact colour of her eyes. He was trying to think of something with which to compare the white and fragrant bloom of her skin. In the old days men would have called her a sonsy lass, but she was more than that, and Stretton felt it. He was in love with her mouth, her nose, her throat, her bosom and shoulders and her hands, but he was in love too with the sensuous, happy soul of her. She suggested fragrance, a wholesome firmness of flesh and of spirit, supreme health, humour, tenderness, gusts of wise laughter. She was beneficent; she had the happy vitality which heals. He could imagine her bathing a dog, or sitting very still and serious in church, or teasing her father, or giving a fractious pony a shrewd cut with the whip. There was nothing flabby about her, nothing which struck him as being artificial.

But what to say to her he could not think. She seemed so very vivid and real that he could not talk to her about unreal things. He had no patter in her presence; and absorbed in the reality of her, he sat mute.

As for Jess, she watched the pony's ears and the road, and her profile was neither expectant nor slyly self-conscious. There was a certain delightful obviousness about the silence of the man who sat opposite her. His shyness was unusual, fiercely unusual; she was intrigued by it; it appealed to her. It was the sort of shyness which makes a man peculiarly interesting to a woman, especially when she is very sure that he is not a fool. She had her own instinctive prejudices. She disliked round-headed men with flat blue eyes, men with throaty voices, men who oozed with male complacency.

She flicked the pony with the whip.

"Get up, lazybones! You seem to have depressed Jolly, Mr. Stretton."

Her eyes met his, and the smile in them was a challenge.

"Perhaps my weight has," he said.

"Get up, Jolly! Can't you smell your hay? And how is that dear dog of yours?"

He blushed.

"That was a disgraceful lapse on my part, Miss Viner."

"Was it?" she said. "But we all have lapses. I have known father start off for church without his tie. Aren't these beeches grand?"

He agreed with her as to the grandeur of the beeches.

"Ah, but you should see them in the spring," she added, "and the ground all blue in there with bluebells. But perhaps you have?"

"Yes, I have."

He was reminded suddenly of that day when another girl had overtaken him in this same avenue, and his recollections of Isobel Copredy did not help him in his struggle to feel at ease with Jessie Viner. How was it possible for him to feel at ease with her when he was hurt and tantalized by the clear sky of her in which his unhappy self-consciousness was like a drifting cloud?

"I remember in France——" he began, and hesitated.

She waited, encouragingly.

"Trees—like this?"

"Not quite. They let their beeches run very high in France. I remember villages all hidden in trees; you walked into them through avenues that were like the nave of a cathedral. And then—the great avenues of poplars."

"Lombardy poplars?"

"Some of them. Towering up with a strip of road below and a strip of sky above. Immense!"

She caught the far-away look in his eyes.

"In France," she said, "you had to do such a lot of things which you loathed doing."

His eyes came back from the distance to her. "How do you know that?" they asked her; "and what a queer remark for a young woman to make!" Aloud he said: "Of course, one had to."

He remembered that she had had a brother killed in France, and he asked her about her brother.

"He used to write to you?"

“Often. We got on well together. I think he used to tell me things, things which he told nobody else, about being afraid—you know, and the homesickness, and all that! I used to try to help him. It taught me a lot, Mr. Stretton.”

He looked at her girlish and gracious profile and discovered the woman in her. He had felt that her physical comeliness was a soft veil covering another and more subtle comeliness.

“Of course it helped him,” he said; and then he added, “We needed it—at times. I had not anybody to write to me like that.”

“That was rather hard,” she answered.

“I used to write imaginary letters.”

“To someone?”

“Yes. Someone who was supposed to understand, someone I had never met.”

And then he blushed fiercely and sat in silence, realizing that they had touched each other with a touch which was not physical. He had seen her eyes change to him, warm to him, and he felt a sudden awkwardness of fear and of delight. There were so many things which he could not tell her, and yet she was the one woman to whom he longed to tell them. His face grew blank.

She avoided looking at him too directly. She too had been touched by something which evoked compassion. She felt that he had suffered greatly, and that his difficult shyness was somehow the result of all that suffering.

“Well, one forgets,” she said; “it must be hard to believe sometimes that all that happened.”

He nodded and said nothing, but she had more than a suspicion that in his case it had left a scar.

They had reached the top of the hill and the pony broke into a trot. The quickened movement and the more rapid rhythm of the little beast’s hoofs seemed to bring a reverie to both of them, a reverie which neither of them desired to break. They had come unexpectedly close to each other, and exchanged words of unexpected significance, and they wished to reflect upon those words.

Ottways came into view, red among its autumn trees, and here their double reverie was broken by a coincidence which Stretton did not

welcome. A car came out from between the pillars and turned across the road in front of them, a grey car with a young woman driving it. Jess had to check her pony. The two vehicles passed each other very slowly and the eyes of the two drivers met.

Stretton remained motionless. She had stared straight at him for a moment with a hard, unflinching stare, but now his back was towards her and he was glad. He did not know that Isobel Copredy had returned; he had tried to forget all about her and that disastrous night in Mascall's Wood; he hoped that she was as ready to ignore him as he was to forget her.

The grey car disappeared down the road, and the pony resumed his trotting. Jessie Viner was looking straight ahead.

"Miss Copredy was in France."

"Was she?" he said tonelessly.

"Driving an ambulance. It's queer how you know you don't like certain people and that they don't like you."

"I could not imagine you liking her," he said; "a hard young woman like that."

She observed him for a moment, and saw something which puzzled her.

"Hard, yes, I should think she is. She always reminds me of the sort of man I hate."

"What sort of man?" he asked her.

She laughed.

"Oh, there are quite a number of types. Are you like that?"

"Rather badly so."

And he lapsed into a moody and self-questioning silence.

They hardly spoke again during the rest of the drive, nor did Jessie Viner seem embarrassed by his silence. By the white gate at the end of the Romans Farm lane they found Thomas Viner standing with a thistle-spud under his arm and his eyes on the horizon. He smiled when he saw John Stretton in the trap.

"So Jess gave you a lift," he said, swinging open the gate.

Stretton was leaning over to open the door and get out.

"My bicycle broke down and I had to leave it at Kingsbury."

He got out and stood there rather awkwardly.

“Come in and have some supper with us,” said old Viner.

Stretton looked at Jess and then at the door of the cart which was still hanging open.

“Thanks. I must get back to-night.”

He raised his head and his eyes met hers.

“Another night, if I may?”

“Saturday?”

“Yes, Saturday.”

She drove down the lane, smiling back at him for a moment. Old Viner was watching Stretton, and Stretton felt that he was being watched.

“Well, I must be moving,” he said.

“All right. Eight o’clock on Saturday.”

“I’ll be glad to come. Good night, Mr. Viner.”

“Good night, lad.”

And Stretton walked away over Burnt Heath, wondering whether he had made a fool of himself, and why old Viner had called him “lad.”

XX

STRETTON POCKETS A REEL OF COTTON

STRETTON worked hard during the next three days, and the colour and the smell of the autumn woods were very much with him. He was strangely conscious of the world which surrounded both him and her, or as his brother would have put it, "Burnt Heath had become sexed." In his sensitive way Stretton had gone back to dreams; he marvelled at the clear reality, and withdrawing himself a little from it, was able to dwell on it as on the beauty of some landscape which was his and yet not his. He had been very lonely, and the thought of her dispelled his loneliness. His love was at its spring, full of wonder at her and at life and at its own burgeoning emotions, able to stand apart in quiet exultation, seeing the flower but not the fruit implied behind the flower. He was in his first stage of wonder at her. He had not come to the fierce anguish of a man who still wonders but who yearns to possess. He was ready to stand and stare like a sensitive boy, without thinking of drawing nearer.

For as he had said to himself after that drive from Kingsbury: "Why all this clenching of hands? Can my love do her any harm? If it helps me to think of her in that way, why should I not think of her, see her? She need not know."

And so for a little while he ceased to struggle. He went out into the green world of his fancy and let himself wonder. He refused to realize that the sweet pain of it might become a fierce anguish which could not easily be borne. He painted a picture and stood before it, as though the figure in the picture had not arms and shoulders and breasts of flesh and blood.

He was carrying in his winter wood, shouldering faggots and logs, wading knee deep through the wetness of the yellowing fern, and stacking his fuel behind the cottage. Never had his body felt so strong or so full of exultant health. Often, between his journeyings, he would walk down to the blue gate and look through the gap at Romans Farm, her home.

"She is there," he would say to himself.

He would wonder what she was doing. He could picture her gathering the late apples in the orchard or making pastry in the beamed kitchen with her round forearms all white with flour.

"I shall see her on Saturday."

Always that was the last line of the song.

During one of these pauses of his at the garden gate he saw the unexpected figure of Isobel Copredy crossing the heath. She had a dog at her heels, a big wolf-hound, and they passed within fifty yards of the cottage, moving in and out among the yews and thorns. Stretton saw her face turned towards him. He stood quite still, watching her and her dog like two figures in a tapestry. They passed and disappeared, and he thought no more of it, though the evanescent presence of her left a little soreness within him, for she reminded him too vividly of the thing which he had learned to fear.

But he attached no significance to her presence on the heath. They had finished with each other. Nor did he see anything suggestive in the figure of the dog.

Saturday came, clear and fresh and sunny. He worked hard all day carrying and stacking his winter wood, and after tea he went up to his bedroom to change. His dream might be very much a dream, but it did not prevent him from being naïvely careful about his clothes; he had a bath and a second shave; he chose his dark blue suit with the faint white lines in it, a dark blue bow tie, and a blue silk handkerchief. He took a good deal of trouble with his hair and his hands, and ended by looking at himself in his mirror. It was not a question of mere crude male vanity. If his vision of her made life seem so much more wonderful, was he not justified in being fastidious about all life's details? He wanted her to like him, to find himself pleasant in her eyes. He had never troubled to change his clothes for the sake of Isobel Copredy.

At six o'clock Stretton lit his lamp and sat down with a book, but at the end of an hour it is very doubtful whether he had any recollection at all of what he had been reading. At seven he damped down the fire, put Paul to bed, lit the storm-lantern he used at night, and extinguished the lamp. It was a fine, clear night, without any wind. He locked the door and started over the heath, following the faint track by the light of his lantern.

He was conscious of a feeling of excitement, of the dark immensity of the night beyond the circle of light thrown by his lantern. He was conscious, too, of an effort to suppress something. It reminded him of his first parade, a

feeling of excitement and the knowledge that it had to be suppressed; a sense of responsibility, an inward repeating of the orders he might have to give, a determination not to give the wrong order, not to make a fool of himself before the men. He remembered that he had not made a fool of himself. But then—Jessie Viner and a platoon of infantry! There was a difference!

At Romans Farm they had not expected him quite so early, and he was met at the door by Jess. She was wearing a white blouse, and he saw her hair ashine in the light of the lamp which hung from the beam in the centre of the hall. He heard someone bustling up the stairs.

"Come in."

"I hope I am not too early?"

"Not a bit."

She closed the door, and he extinguished his lantern and stood it against the wall. He had looked at her as though he wanted very much to look at her and yet was half afraid to look.

"Father will be in in a minute. He is down in one of the buildings with a sick beast."

She led the way into the sitting-room, and Stretton noticed that the table was not laid for supper and that her workbasket had not been cleared away. The lid was open, and he saw its reels and scissors and a pair of Thomas Viner's socks.

"Do sit down."

She knelt and stirred the fire, and he took the extreme edge of old Viner's chair, and pretended to warm his hands.

"Mother is trying on a new dress. Do you mind if I go and help Mrs. Rugglesworth for a minute?"

"Please don't worry about me. I shall be all right here."

She went, and he watched her go; she left the door open and he heard her cross to the kitchen. She was speaking to Mrs. Rugglesworth, and so long as he could listen to her voice he was content to sit quite still, but directly she ceased to speak his eyes began to wander round the room. He felt that the room had changed. It had always had a peculiar charm for him with its mahogany table and its round-backed chairs, its sofa with the round bolsters at each end, the Kidderminster carpet, the engravings of pictures by

Landseer and Frith. It struck him as a room which belonged to a quieter and more restful age. There was nothing showy or ostentatious about it, and he realized that at one time in his life he would have called it Victorian and thought it ugly. He could hear the grandfather clock ticking in the hall, and Mrs. Viner moving about in the room above. Old Viner's leather slippers waited beside the fender. The photo of Jessie Viner at the age of sixteen stood on the mantelpiece beside a vase of paper spills. Stretton stood up and looked at it.

"How she has changed!" he thought.

He faced about and found his eyes fixed on her workbasket. It fascinated him with the spell of her. Even old Viner's grey socks were hallowed!

"It suits her so well," he reflected; "she seems so contented."

And then he was tempted. He wanted something out of that workbasket, something which belonged to her. He took two steps across the hearthrug and stood listening, and glancing towards the door. He could hear noises in the kitchen.

Next moment he perpetrated a theft, picking a reel of black cotton out of the basket and slipping it into his pocket, and returning guiltily but exultantly to the chair by the fire. No one had seen him.

But someone had. Jessie Viner had come to the kitchen doorway just when his hand was poised intently over the basket, and from the kitchen doorway it was possible to see across the hall into the sitting-room. She was the witness of her lover's theft. She saw him slip something into his pocket and step quickly back towards the fire.

Her eyes remained shadowy, thoughtful. She did not smile.

"My basket," she reflected. "Did he know that it was mine?"

She was pretty sure that he did.

Half a minute later she came in to lay the table, and Stretton got up and helped her with the cloth. She had closed the lid of her workbasket and placed it on the "pie-crust" table by the window. A glimpse of her father's grey sock had persuaded her to wonder who darned Stretton's socks for him, if they were darned, and as they were spreading the tablecloth she asked him.

"Who darns your socks, Mr. Stretton?"

They smiled at each other across the white cloth.

“They don’t get darned,” he said.

“Then what happens to them?”

“When they get too bad I throw them away.”

“But what waste! Why don’t you send them to your sister?”

His smile broadened.

“Why should a sister darn her brother’s socks?”

“Does your sister take that view?”

“Yes; and why shouldn’t she?”

“She’s under no obligation, of course. Some of us make obligations, but that’s sentimental and old-fashioned. Woman the house-slave!”

They laughed.

“But it must be dull.”

She began to lay the silver and the knives, and he stood with his back to the fire and watched her.

“It all depends,” she said. “If you start life thinking you want a new thrill every other day——”

“Well?”

“You don’t get it. But you can think of a lot of pleasant things even while you are darning socks.”

“I suppose you can,” he said.

She placed the bread trencher on the table.

“You had better send yours down to us; mother and I can mend them. Or why not to your own mother?”

“Do you think she would like to mend them?”

“Is that all you know about mothers?” her eyes asked him.

But here this debate upon socks and the significance of the mending of socks was interrupted by the coming of Mrs. Viner. She appeared full of smiles in a new dress, and she was kind to Stretton, partly because she had a very real liking for him, but partly because she was a wise woman. Thomas Viner and his wife had no secrets between them, and if they had discussed John Stretton as the potential lover of their daughter they had agreed that an affectionate neutrality was the safest attitude to adopt. They had great faith

in Jess. She had plenty of character and no flabbiness, and their liking for Stretton implied an instinctive trust.

"The lad's a clean lad," old Viner had said of him. "I've watched his eyes when he has looked at our girl."

There were times when Mrs. Viner allowed herself a mellow, autumnal humour; she became a motherly and kindly quiz, and her humour had always been a very effective one in its persuading of young people and children. Mrs. Viner had no use for the modern child. "Spoilt little savages," she called them.

"I hope you have brought your dog?" she said to her guest.

Stretton smiled at her.

"No, not to-night. I put him to bed before I left. He sent you his best respects."

"Did he, indeed! I'm glad. Jessie, where's father? It is close on eight o'clock."

Thomas Viner came in that moment, shook hands with Stretton, and picking up his slippers went to change his boots in the hall.

"Jenny is better," he said through the doorway.

Mrs. Viner explained to Stretton that Jenny was a cow, and Jess, crossing to the kitchen, returned with a pile of hot plates, Mrs. Rugglesworth following with two vegetable dishes and a beef-steak pie. Thomas Viner came in and stood by Stretton by the fire.

"I hope you are as hungry as I am," he said.

"Now, father."

They gathered round the table, and Thomas Viner said grace.

Stretton enjoyed that meal. His too sensitive self-consciousness was soothed by the pleasant homeliness of the room and by the simplicity and the kindliness of the people who sat with him at the table. He faced Jess, Jess with her frank face and her sensitive eyes. He saw her against the firelight, deep-throated, comely, with fresh lips and shining hair. She did not talk much; it was her mother who talked. Old Viner too was rather silent, but his silence was always a comfortable silence, like the repose of harvest fields on a quiet evening in summer. Stretton had a feeling that these people were good for him, that they were as warming and as wholesome as the food and the fire.

He glanced often at Jess, shyly, restrainedly. Sometimes her eyes met his and they gave him a sense of depth and of mystery.

"I think the only life worth living," he heard himself saying, "is the life of growing things. You are nearest to all that matters."

He saw Jess nod her head. Her father had something to say on the subject.

"Any man on the land knows that you don't get something for nothing."

"Ah, there you are," said his wife; "if those poor fools in the factories were told the truth. But, after all, it is the inside that matters, and most of them have got nothing but stomachs. What's all the socialism but appealing to a man's stomach? The laziest are always the greediest."

She turned to Stretton.

"I brought up my children, Mr. Stretton, to say: 'What have I got to do to-day?' not, 'What would I like to do to-day?' There is a lot of difference."

"There must be," he said, glancing at Jess.

After supper he sat opposite Mr. Viner in one of the leather arm-chairs and smoked his pipe. The table was cleared, and the two women joined them in front of the fire, with a workbasket on a stool between them, and their bowed yet attentive heads added to Stretton's sense of repose. The whole group seemed so natural, and he so natural a part of it that he was persuaded to dream of some fireside of his own. His thoughts went to the cottage under Mascall's Wood, and suddenly the emptiness of it chilled him. Was it always going to be empty like that, a lonely place dwelt in by a man with a dog, a cat, and a pipe?

He grew silent, with his eyes on the fire. His face betrayed an unconscious sadness, and there were two eyes in the room which observed his sadness and pondered it. Nor was he conscious of being observed. He did not realize that he might matter sufficiently or that his sadness might appeal to a girl who was strong and happy.

The clock in the hall struck ten, and he rose to go. He did not want to go, for he felt that some virtue would leave him when he passed out into the darkness.

He said good-bye to Jess and her mother, and Thomas Viner went with him to the door.

"You won't want your lantern," he said; "the moon's shining."

“Good night, Mr. Viner. I have enjoyed this evening.”

“Good night. You must come down again soon.”

The door had closed, and as he stood at the gate he heard old Viner shooting the bolts. The moon looked down at him over the high black roof of a barn and out of a sky that was a sheet of steel. The grass glimmered with dew. The shooting of those bolts had seemed to Stretton to be symbolical, and he stood by the white fence looking at the farmhouse with all its quiet life hidden behind the curtained windows. His heart uttered a cry of pain. He felt himself out in the night, a homeless man, and very lonely, and he wished himself back in the firelit room, watching a girl’s hands at work.

A passionate impulse stirred in him. He remembered noticing that the curtains had not been closely drawn, and he realized that it would be possible for him to see into the room. A grass path and a narrow flower border ran along the front of the house, and Stretton walked softly along the path towards the window.

Old Viner was by the fire, knocking out his pipe, and his wife sat tidying her workbasket. Jess was standing in the middle of the room in an attitude of contemplation, her right hand laid along her cheek. She seemed to be listening to something within herself, and not for any sound from the outer world.

Suddenly she turned and walked to the window and drew back one of the curtains. She remained very still for a moment, her eyes looking out into the night. Then she smiled and gently drew the curtains together.

Stretton, with that smile of hers in his heart, went blundering homewards over the heath.

XXI

STRETTON TRIES TO TELL

THE weather broke suddenly and the autumn storms swept over Burnt Heath and made wild music in Mascall's Wood.

For three days it rained and blew, and the tall firs rolled like the masts of ships, and from the oaks and beeches the yellow leaves whirled in showers. The same swarthy and tumultuous sky raced over the hills with never a break in it, and there were no moments of sunlight or of wet azure at sunset or with the coming of the dawn. As he sat at his meals Stretton could see the yews on the heath tossing their arms in tragic protest, and the shivering thorns huddling and shrinking from the rain. Romans Farm was blotted out. His own roof had developed a leak, and he had had to climb up among the rafters and rescue his ceiling by placing a zinc bath to catch the drip.

But he did not stay indoors. The storm was apposite, and he put on his old trench coat and field boots, and talked with the wind and the rain, adventuring in among his sailing trees where the bracken lay like sea-wrack of tangled gold. There was a litter of dead wood everywhere, and he discovered more than one less stout-hearted tree lying in a comrade's arms with a fringe of torn roots lifting a shelf of soil. He cut away these trees as though he were clearing wreckage from the deck of the ship. He liked the sense of struggle, the storm note, the roar of the wind, the flick of the rain into his eyes and hair, for he was fighting other things, cutting his way to some sort of personal decision. He was through with his spring-time; he was a man with an axe in his hands.

At night he sat by his fire and listened to the wind in the trees, with the dog at his feet, and the old cottage giving an occasional shudder. The green meadow mood had passed, the drifting purposeless dream, the boy's exultation in love for love's sake. That was all nonsense, moonlight and metaphysics. He was a man; he felt like a man; he yearned like a man. "I want her," he said; "to hold and to possess. She is what I lack, what I have always lacked. Man is not made to live alone."

But how?

He could not even begin to think of her as his unless he faced himself and his limitations, unless she knew, and that meant that he would have to tell her. There were times when he thought that it would be easy to tell her,

times when he shrank from the thought of it with a fastidious and quite extraordinary fierceness. But he was not a man of compromises. He did not want the easy kiss, the easy embrace, and some disillusioning reaction afterwards. He wanted a mate, a mate with deep trustful eyes who would stand with her arm about him, looking out at the world bravely, and with eyes which knew and understood. He wanted the sense of goodness, of tender security, of comradeship, of an intimate and sensuous joy which has nothing to regret. He knew that all this was impossible unless he told her.

It took John Stretton a week to make his decision, and by that time the gales had gone, to be followed by the stillness of an anti-cyclone and the first autumnal frosts. Stretton felt himself braced by this first breath of winter. The sun rose all gold and set all red. There was a zest in the lighting of the fire, with the windows grizzled with frost. His early tea and his first pipe tasted good.

"I shall tell her," he said to himself! "otherwise—it can be nothing but dreams. I want her, not a dream."

He had begun to think that it might be easy to tell her. He felt valiant, and full of faith in her sympathy. If she had understood her brother so well that he had been able to write to her of his fear and his homesickness, surely she would be able to understand his own tragedy. For it was a tragedy. But he wanted her to see him as he was, to clear away any unfair illusion.

"Unless she knows," he thought, "I can have no right to think of her as a man thinks of a woman."

He felt full of confidence on that Saturday evening when he lit his lantern and prepared to go down to Romans Farm, though his confidence was a lonely man's faith in a strength which had been built up in solitude. He was not sufficiently alive to the human stress of the adventure. He did not realize that her nearness might throw his imagined calmness into fatal confusion. Personalities interact. The sound of a voice may melt the iron of a man's resolve and leave him hesitating and afraid.

He did not quite know how or where or when he would tell her. He hoped for some happy opportunity. He did not think that he would shirk the crisis if it came.

It was a still night and rather dark, and Stretton went down over the heath with his lantern swinging beside him and throwing shafts of light into the gorse and the heather. There were stars, brittle, blinking stars. He could

hear a dog barking in the distance and the murmur of a train in the Kingsbury valley.

He had reached the white gate at the end of the lane, and his lantern, held low, showed him no more than the four lower bars, when a voice came out of the darkness.

"Is that you, Mr. Stretton?"

He was startled, and raising his lantern saw her standing on the other side of the gate and resting her arms on the top bar. She was wearing a cloak but no hat. The shine from his lantern made her face look white yet shadowy.

"I was coming to see you all. Is anything——"

"I'm worried," she said; "father and mother drove down to Kingsbury this afternoon, and they should have been back two hours ago."

Stretton lowered his lantern, and her face melted into the darkness.

"I'm sorry. They may have stayed late."

"Perhaps. You know how one begins to imagine things."

"Can I do anything?"

"No. I have sent Rugglesworth off on his bicycle and I came here to listen."

He put his lantern down on the ground, and its circle of light ceased halfway up the gate and left their faces in the darkness.

"May I wait and see?"

"Do," she said; "but it is rather cold."

"Don't worry about me. I should like to stay, if you will let me."

He knew that his opportunity had come, but now that it was here, so near him, he was afraid, for her voice, coming suddenly out of the darkness, had filled him with so vivid a consciousness of her that the man in him was overwhelmed by it. There had been a note of appeal in her voice. She was worried. How could he begin to blurt about his own affairs when she was absorbed in her own anxiety?

They stood there in silence for some moments, listening. Had she not said that she had come here to listen? And yet his silence seemed awkward and unsympathetic.

“Probably the pony has cast a shoe,” he said.

“Probably. It is foolish to worry.”

“It is natural.”

A second silence followed, and he was aware of nothing but his nearness and the confusion of his own thoughts, nor could he help wondering what her thoughts were as she leaned upon the gate. Her face was obscure. His sensitive spirit, jealous of its own cloak of reserve, shrank a little from the unknown reticences in her. If only they could have met here under other circumstances!

“Listen!” she said suddenly.

He had heard nothing, but he could hear the sound of her breathing.

“What was it?”

“Only my fancy.”

There was yet another silence.

“It is good of you to wait,” she said presently.

“Oh, not at all. There is nothing up there for me.”

He broke off in the middle of the sentence, and it seemed to him that the shadowy eyes in her shadowy face were looking at him intently.

“It must be rather lonely for you.”

He gave a start, a very obvious start, but before he could think of anything to say to her a sudden light came wavering into view between the dark hedges of the lane. It was the light of a bicycle which was being ridden slowly and a little unsteadily up the sandy road.

“Rugglesworth,” she said, and opened the gate.

He stood back and let her go alone, for she had the warm heart which will not wait upon the shadowy edge of an emotion, but must rush to the centre of it, and Stretton felt that she wished to go alone. He heard her call to the man, and saw the light sway and remain still. The carter’s voice came to him on the still night air.

“No; nought but a broken trace, Miss Jessie. They stopped at Willowmaston, and Honeyset the saddler is putting it right. They’ll be home in half an hour.”

“Thanks, Bob; it was good of you to come back at once. I was worrying.”

“Don’t ye worry no more, miss.”

“Go in and get some supper, Bob.”

They came back to the gate, and Rugglesworth looked a little curiously at the man with the lantern.

“It is all right, Mr. Stretton. A broken trace. They will be home in half an hour.”

“I’m glad,” he said, and felt his opportunity standing beside him like a ghost.

The carter pushed the gate open and held it, but since neither of the other figures moved he exercised a plain man’s discretion, and wheeling his bicycle through, let the gate swing back. It closed with a clash of the catch, a broad hint to them both that Robert Rugglesworth was a man of tact.

“I’m very glad,” said Stretton.

She was standing quite still in the middle of the lane, and suddenly she moved to the gate and leaned against it with her spread arms resting on the bar.

“I shall wait here for them. I used always to wait here when I was small, ready to open the gate.”

He looked at the sky, at the shadowy head and shoulders of her, at his lantern and at the light playing upon her feet and her skirt. His opportunity was here, but now that he could seize it he hesitated with a sudden exaggeration of his sensitiveness, telling himself that he was little more than a stranger to her and that he had no claim upon her sympathy. And what a tale to have to tell a woman, the woman whom he had begun to love! Would she pity him, or would she be repelled, shrinking from that vague and irresponsible taint of violence in him? He did not know.

He bent down and picked up the lantern.

“I ought to be getting back,” he said.

She remained very still.

“Why? You will come in and have some supper with us.”

“No,” he said; “your people will be tired.”

She seemed to feel his hesitation, his difficult self-consciousness, that inward worrying of the spirit.

"They will be glad to see you. Besides, it must be so lonely up there."

"I'm used to it."

His tone might be stubborn but it was not convincing, and she was growing more and more aware of some great secret disharmony which made it impossible for him to be what he wished to be. She had seen what she had seen; she was no child but very much the woman, and a woman with very sensitive intuitions. He was fighting himself, repressing himself, trying to hide what could not be hidden.

"No one gets used to loneliness," she said.

Her contradiction was a challenge, and for one brief moment he was very near the edge of a confession, obeying an impulse which that voice of hers had provoked. A single word, a flash of light in the darkness, two personalities realizing each other in the sudden blaze of it, and the thing would be done, but Stretton could not bring himself to utter that word. He shrank from the nakedness of it. He felt a sort of clinging to the darkness.

"Oh, I don't know," he said.

She was silent for a moment, as though she felt his hesitation and respected it. He stood there holding the lantern, and the light from it seemed to emit tremulous vibrations.

"I should be lonely."

Her voice had a sudden quality of softness, but it affected him in a way that he himself would never have forecasted. It hardened him against himself. It made him see in her an exaggerated purity and innocence which made all that he wished to tell her seem impossibly crude and ugly. How could he blurt out those harsh facts? "I'm not normal, not quite like other men. The savage in me breaks loose. I have been very near to murder. I have been in prison." It was impossible. At least, he felt it to be impossible. His very love for her, his sense of her sweet and pleasant wholesomeness made him revolt from such a self-revelation. He was conscious of a dull and a fatal helplessness, an inevitable something dragging him back.

"Oh, well," he said, "one can get used to it."

He was aware of the ridiculous inadequacy of his words, and of a fierce desire to escape. He felt foolish, ineffectual. And then, in the clearness of the

frosty night they heard the clatter of hoofs upon the road, and Stretton accepted his reprieve.

"Hallo, they are coming."

He recovered his initiative, and he noticed that this time she did not ask him to stay, and he was disappointed, even while he recognized the unreasonableness of his disappointment.

"I expect they are tired. Will you tell them how glad I am that it was nothing serious?"

"Yes, I will tell them," she said.

When he moved away she was still leaning against the gate, and he wondered whether he had offended her.

"Good night, Miss Jess."

"Good night. Thank you for waiting with me."

"I wish I could have done more. Good night."

He turned towards the heath, hoping that he might hear her voice again, for he felt the slackness of this ending, its rather futile hopelessness, when he had hoped for so much, but she did not break the silence. He walked about twenty yards and hesitated, only to realize that his lantern would betray his hesitation. In fact she did notice that the light had ceased to move, and it flashed a message to her as she leaned against the gate.

"You wanted to stay," she thought, "but something would not let you."

Stretton had moved on. She saw the light disappear behind a group of old thorn trees, and she imagined him trudging back over the heath to his cottage and his loneliness. He had refused to admit that he was lonely, even when she had felt every fibre of him quivering with loneliness.

"Why are you so difficult?" she thought. "There is a reason."

Stretton had paused again and had turned towards the south. He knew that his lantern was screened from her, and he dallied, accusing himself of faintheartedness and of fatal indecision. He had had his chance and he had thrown it away; he was too sensitive to be convincing.

He turned slowly towards the north, and as he did so he became aware of a most surprising and arrestive phenomenon. He was looking towards the group of trees where they tailed out over the heath, and in the midst of the blackness he saw two red dots glowing like liquid fire. He stopped,

astonished. The two red circles were set very close together, and about thirty yards distant from him, so far as he could judge.

A moment later he realized that he was looking at two eyes, the eyes of an animal lit up by the light of his lantern. He made an instinctive movement in the direction of the eyes.

"Hallo! Who's that?"

Almost instantly he was answered by the growl of a dog, and of a big dog. The two red dots moved and then disappeared as though the beast had been jerked back by a lead, and his head drawn to one side so that his eyes no longer caught the light. Stretton heard a rustling in the heather as of someone stealing away.

He remained standing there, listening, and he did not press the pursuit.

"Who the devil——?" he thought.

His memory prompted him. He remembered Isobel Copredy and her wolf-hound moving over the heath like two figures in an old tapestry. But surely—— It seemed absurd to postulate her wandering up here at eight o'clock at night, and a November night at that! But he felt uneasy, strangely uneasy as he resumed his journey home.

XXII

A MAN ADVISES AND A WOMAN SYMPATHIZES

THERE was surprise at Romans Farm when Rugglesworth's lad returned with an untouched jug of milk and set it down upon the kitchen table.

" 'E don't want it."

"Not to-day, Sam?"

"No, nor to-morrer. Mr. Stretton's gone to London."

"Alone?"

"No, with a flat bag. I met 'im on the heath."

"Walking?"

" 'E was walking when I met 'im."

So the news reached Mrs. Viner, no very sensational piece of news either, that a young man should go up to London for a night, a young man who was fresh to the country. Mrs. Viner thought very little of it, and she passed the news on to Jess, who thought more of it than did her mother. Mrs. Viner knew nothing of hesitations outside five-barred gates, of abstracted reels of cotton, of a forlorn face seen at a lamplit window. To Jess it suggested the idea of running away, though she had no arguments to advance in support of the suggestion. It was just her feeling about the incident, that, and no more, but she did trouble to intercept Sam and ask him a very natural question.

"Who is looking after Mr. Stretton's dog?"

"I be, till 'e comes back."

"That's all right," she said.

But she did wonder whether he would come back. Her intuition followed him farther than he might have imagined, and with sympathetic precision, for he himself had wondered whether he would come back.

Somewhere about noon a telegram reached Stow House, and Mrs. Stretton opened it.

"Expect me to dinner. Staying night.—JOHN."

Lavinia was greatly excited. Bartholomew was playing golf and she dispatched a message to him by the car, and then went to interview the cook. For no other member of the family would she have exercised so much forethought in the ordering of dinner, and Jane the cook, who was an old retainer, knew as much as his mother did about Mr. John's likes and dislikes. "Trifle, m'am; he always did love a good trifle." "But isn't it a little cold for trifle, Jane?" "Bless you, m'am, Mr. John would have asked for trifle at the north pole." So trifle it was.

Rollin Beal was at lunch when a taxi stopped outside his house, and Stretton and his suit-case emerged from it. A moment later Stretton was appealing to the imperturbable Parker.

"I won't keep him five minutes. It is really rather important."

"Dr. Beal is at lunch."

"I can wait until he has finished."

Parker was a woman and she had the prejudices of a woman, and most women found it hard to refuse anything to John Stretton.

"Come in, please. I will tell Dr. Beal."

But when Beal heard who his visitor was he came out and brought Stretton in by the arm.

"Have you had lunch?" was his first question.

"No."

"Then you will have it with me. Parker, can you manage lunch for Mr. Stretton?"

"Certainly, sir."

With Stretton seated at his dining-table, and Parker dismissed to her own dinner, Beal asked his second question.

"Well, what's the matter?"

It was a very direct question, and Stretton was not frightened by its directness; he had come to consult the oracle and an oracle which did not lie.

"Women," he said; "women and loneliness."

And Beal remembered Carlyon's prophecy.

He rose and poured out a glass of white wine for Stretton, sensing the man's overwroughtness, and noticing the tense mouth and the troubled eyes. Such a man as Stretton would not come easily to a father confessor to speak of such intimate distractions and to uncover his own nakedness of soul. Stretton must have been feeling rather desperate, brittle with self-repression, strung to a very high pitch of emotion, to rush to him and blurt out such elemental truths.

"Tell me about it. Can you?"

"I have got to tell you. I want to ask you again whether I ought to marry."

"My dear man," said Beal, "I think that depends on the woman."

He had listened to many confessions from all sorts of men and women, confessions which were so Freudian in their complexion that even an idealist might have doubted whether sex and the subconscious soul were not identical, but Beal was not a Freudian, and he saw more in Stretton than a lonely man obsessed by his own sex. He glanced at his watch.

"I can give you an hour."

"Really?"

"Yes. Finish your lunch, and we will go upstairs to my den. Do you mind if I go and scribble a letter?"

"Please do."

He left Stretton to his meal, and returning for him in ten minutes took him up to the library, and Parker brought them coffee.

"Now light your pipe, man, and tell me just as much or just as little as you please."

"I should like to tell you everything."

"So much the better."

He had put Stretton in a chair with his back to the light, and he drew his own chair into line with Stretton's, so that they sat and talked like two men looking at a landscape, though the landscape was Beal's cases of books. There are certain rooms which are intimate and soothing, and Stretton was soothed by this room. His self-consciousness lost its jumpiness; he felt himself surrounded by an atmosphere of understanding.

"I'm in love," he said.

A month ago the words would have sounded crude to him, but there is no crudity in deep and genuine emotion, nor was there any crudity in his confession to Rollin Beal. He told him of his affair with Isobel Copredy, and how its rather disastrous climax had thrown him into an anguish of doubt and discouragement, but when he began to speak of Jessie Viner Beal was aware of a change in his voice. It sounded more soft and a little awed. His eyes looked into mysterious distances; he spoke of her lovingly and with a simple and natural delight.

And then his mood reverted to doubt and discouragement.

"You see what it means to me, Beal. She's good, she's wholesome and lovable; she is the first woman who has lifted me right out of myself. But then comes the tragedy. I can't hope for anything unless I feel sure that if I married her—— But then, of course, I don't know whether she would ever care. I'm not the sort of pup who takes a woman's 'Yes' for granted."

His eyes glanced anxiously at Beal's calm profile.

"Ought I to marry?"

"It depends on the woman."

"You mean——?"

"If she is good for you, if she is what I call a healer."

"You would say yes?"

"I think so."

Stretton sat forward in his chair and stared at the carpet.

"I feel, somehow, that if she loved me, if she were my comrade, that I should have nothing more to fear. But then I am faced with the responsibility of telling her what I am. That's the most damnable part of it."

He sat there in tense silence, but in Beal's eyes there was the beginning of that wise and beneficent smile.

"But is it damnable? Let us look a little more deeply. You feel, at present, that you cannot tell her?"

"Yes, that's it."

"One moment, man. Now isn't this need of telling her the truth the real test?"

"How do you mean?"

"You will not be able to tell her until you feel convinced within yourself that you can tell her."

He glanced at Stretton, and he saw a new light in Stretton's eyes.

"Go on, Beal, go on."

"Don't you grasp the significance of that? It will mean that if you can tell her everything, she is the woman to whom a man can tell anything, because she understands, it will mean that she is the woman. Do you grasp my meaning?"

Stretton rested his head in his hands.

"By God, I do."

He was silent awhile as though absorbing the suggestiveness of Beal's words.

"Yes, I see," he said presently; "there is a sort of ripeness in one's choice, a ripeness that has to be waited for. That is what you mean?"

"I do. Never pluck raw fruit. Wait for it to ripen, and if it ripens—well, you will find it good."

Stretton raised his head and his face had regained a shine of tranquillity. He rose and went and stood by the window and looked down into the street.

"So I ought to wait till my chance ripens, till my confession falls off the bough. Is that fair to her?"

"Where is the unfairness? She will ripen it—if she wishes it to ripen."

"You think so?"

"My dear man, yes. Hasn't love intuition? If she is going to care—the time will come——"

"Yes, yes, but won't it shock her, won't it make her afraid? Won't she think me a treacherous devil to have kept all this back?"

"Stretton," said Beal, rising and walking to the window, "someone once said that perfect love casts out all fear. It is true. And it is the only love worth having."

Stretton turned quickly and laid his hands on Beal's shoulders.

"You great friend," he said, "you healer."

So it came about that Stretton carried to Stow House an impression of happiness and dignity. His mother thought that she had never seen him

looking so well, or so interesting, for always she had believed him to be the most interesting of her children. Life had not changed at Stow House. Bartholomew bustled in, sly and triumphant, to produce the perennial golf ball won from old Lambrick or some other codger at the club. Madge, robust and red, and fresh from a hockey match, took hardly more notice of her brother than if they had met at lunch.

"Hallo, John, how's life?"

"Oh, much as usual," which it was.

He did not resent Stow House and its obviousness, for he was mellower, and he no longer belonged to it. It had no voice in his destiny, and he was ready to appreciate its comfort and its kindliness just as a man can appreciate a parent who has ceased to be parental. Bartholomew and his mother found him cheerful and confident, and they did not detect the more sombre reticence behind his cheerfulness. He looked strong and brown and well, with clear eyes and firm lips. He was more mature, and his mother felt this maturity. The instinctive pride was able to seat itself in her eyes and beam over him. "John is a strong character." Like all women she asked to be shown strength.

That night he slept in his own little room, and as he lay awake in that half-hour of pleasant dreaming before falling asleep, he felt that an infinite number of things had happened in one day. He had lived through a phase, a crisis. He was ready to go back again, eager to go back, and lie under the thatched roof where the wind moved in the tall trees. His sense of loneliness had passed. He had listened to human words, to a wisdom which he knew to be greater than his own. He had been given a deep draught of sympathy. He saw in Jess the wonder of something which might yet be born, something for which he was ready to wait with a greater and more manly patience.

"Perfect love casteth out fear."

Was such wisdom obsolete? Had the machine reduced all beauty to mere pulp?

He fell asleep, reconvinced that what a man thought and felt and strove did matter. It mattered supremely, for it was the breath of life.

His mother drove up to town with him next day, and in the car she asked him a question.

"John, dear, don't you find it very lonely?"

A year ago he would have resented such a question, but he did not resent it now.

“Sometimes.”

She was aware of his faint smile.

“I may get married some day. You won’t grudge me that, mother?”

“My dear,” she said and blushed rather guiltily, “I want you to be happy.”

She was wondering whether he had seen the woman whom he wished to marry, but he did not tell her about Jessie Viner.

“Of course, it may never happen,” he said. “I’m not the sort of man whom the ordinary woman would want to marry.”

“You deserve more than an ordinary woman,” said his mother with admirable and motherly conviction.

It was raining when Stretton reached Kingsbury late on a November afternoon, but he was not depressed by the rain. He hired a car to drive him up to Burnt Heath, and he enjoyed every moment of that drive, for even this short absence had made him realize that this wild country had become the background of his life. It was necessary to him, necessary in its breadth and permanence, even though it might have its seasons of sadness. The sadness of woods and fields is not the sadness of a city, for it is never without hope, the promise of new growth or of a changing sky.

In passing Ottways he looked steadily at the red house beyond the yellowing lime trees and the sombre cedars. He thought that he had finished with Ottways and all that it represented. Rollin Beal had confirmed him in his idealism, and the idealist and the climber have their moments of innocence and of abstraction when they are apt to forget or to ignore the perversities and the petulances of human nature. Some motives may seem incomprehensible and incredibly inadequate to a man who has his head among the stars. They may lie in his path, and he will stumble blindly upon them, even as John Stretton was to stumble over the malicious perversities of sex in a woman.

Along the lane he stood up for a moment to get a glimpse of Romans Farm. He was like a boy nearing home, the boy who was also a lover.

“Stop at the white gate,” he said to the driver.

He did not realize that his face was flushed and his eyes bright with an uncommon brightness. He had forgotten the rain. He was in a little world of romance and mystery.

He climbed out and paid the man, tipping him generously. His suit-case lay on the wet grass, and as the car disappeared down the lane he stood and looked at the white gate as though in the whole world there had never been such a gate!

"That's a good excuse," he thought; "I can fetch my own milk for tea."

It was one of the happiest excuses he could have invented, for as he came down to the farm he met Jess crossing the piece of grass between the house and the farm buildings. She was wearing an old white mackintosh of her father's, and her hair was wet with the rain.

"Can I have some milk and a few eggs?"

She had been collecting eggs and was carrying a basket that was half full of them.

"Yes. So you have not run away from us?"

"No," he said, looking at her. "No."

Her eyes did not avoid his. She was glad to see him, and she let him feel that she was glad to see him.

"Why not come in and have tea with us? You will find no fire lit up there."

"May I?"

She made a movement towards the house.

"Of course. Father has just come in."

He followed her, thinking how beautiful her hair was all wet with the rain.

XXIII

ISOBEL'S DROP OF POISON

At Ottways Colonel Copredy was being made to wonder why a young woman should have so pestilent a temper.

It seemed to him unreasonable and unnecessary, yet his daughter's temper drove him to London for a fortnight, where he put up at his club, and meeting an old friend, one of those abrupt and volcanic persons whose answer to everything is an eruption of the "Shoot the lot" order, old Copredy spoke of his troubles. He said that he did not understand his daughter. He lay back in his club chair and enumerated the various advantages with which Isobel had been favoured. She had a good home, looks, three hundred a year of her own, a car, clothes. She went away when she pleased and returned when she pleased. She had imported a gratuitously large dog into the house, and he, her father, had had nothing to say when the dog had been allowed to play king of the castle on every sofa in the house. Leaning forward in the brown leather chair he swayed to and fro as he talked, like a cuckoo bobbing in the open door of a cuckoo clock. "She makes the house unbearable, quite unbearable! I don't know what to do with her."

Colonel Digby Praed, who shot everybody and damned everything, had a very obvious solution of the difficulty, a solution not of the head but of the liver. His cerebration was a question of getting rid of things. It is so much easier to bayonet a problem than to solve it.

"My dear Copredy, get her married."

He was a large man who had been sandy-headed in his day, a man who had lived well and who had spent his life in giving orders. Life was merely a question of a loud voice and a certain amount of stupid self-assurance. If you issued an order and nothing happened, you raised your voice until something did happen. "Waiter, a whisky-and-soda." "Waiter, a husband for Miss Copredy." It was much the same.

But poor little Copredy was bewildered. The extreme discomfort of the autumn storms at Ottways had upset his digestion. He had taken bicarbonate of soda at night, but then, you know, if a man could not eat his breakfast in comfort, but had to gobble it, his interior was apt to suffer.

“Why get up for breakfast?” said his friend; “breakfast is a beastly meal. I never see a soul before eleven. Get the girl married.”

“I wish I could. The trouble is, Praed, I believe she frightens the men.”

“Nonsense. No women ever frighten me.”

Digby Praed had shot tigers, which was a comparatively easy sport, far less subtle than satisfying or explaining the soul of a young tigress whose cub was her own vanity. It is possible that old Copredy’s daughter had had some disappointment in Scotland; at any rate, she came back to Ottways and turned the house into a jungle. The cook and the housemaid fled and were replaced with difficulty. The gardener and the groom would have fled if they had not had families and a certain prospect of a winter’s unemployment. Even my lady’s car suffered. She bullied it as she might have bullied a horse. It eluded her for a while by refusing to function, and it was towed into a Kingsbury garage with one big end adrift in a cracked crank case. Someone in the garage remarked that “Miss Copredy was hot stuff.” The mechanic who was doctoring the car made it plain that he preferred more oil.

Of the round of quarrels that she had indulged in no one knew, but these quarrels might have been inferred from the disappearance of certain photographs from her sitting-room at Ottways. Also she had received letters, angry letters from two other women, and the letters of angry women are not pleasant to read.

“God pity the unfortunate man who marries you. I am glad that Leonard recovered his reason and saw you just as you are before it was too late. You selfish beast——”

“Isobel,” wrote another more calmly, “I think I made it clear to you that I cannot have you in my house again. I am sorry, but I am quite sure that you understand.”

Hence these tantrums and disharmonies which put poor old Copredy to flight. Isobel, tossed like a piece of hot metal into the autumn dampness of an English countryside, sent up a sound of hissing and of steam until her incandescence was subdued by her surroundings. Ottways bored her exceedingly. She had drained it of adventure, and yet not quite. She was one of those disastrous young women who cannot keep their hands off other people’s adventures, or allow another woman to have a lover without attempting to filch him from her. She might not want the man, but it piqued her to despoil the other woman. She was full of vicious mischief, of sardonic

energy; and she could hate, for hatred is one of those elemental passions which are bred out of gentler people as the world grows older and more kindly.

Until the coming of John Stretton Jessie Viner and Isobel Copredy had been hardly aware of each other's existence. It happened that on the day when Isobel's car broke down on the road from Kingsbury and Willowmaston Stretton came by from Kingsbury on one of Tom Viner's wagons. The autumn gales had passed, and the wet splendour of the Willowmaston beech woods shone in the autumn sunlight. Stretton had hired Viner's wagon and his carter to fetch one of his new section buildings from Kingsbury station. The wagoner was walking beside his horses, while Stretton lay up aloft on a platform of white timber. He could see over the hedges where the wild maple was turning scarlet. Green fields fell away to the Weybourne valley, and here rows of poplars and willows made a mist of flickering gold.

When the blue wagon came upon Isobel Copredy's car it was standing diagonally across the road with one front wheel caught in one of the grass gulleys which drained into the ditch. She was trying to extricate it by pushing against the dumb-irons, but though she could move the car she was not strong enough to force the front wheels up the steep camber of the road. She was hot and angry. A strand of red hair lay along one cheek.

The wagoner stopped his team. As a matter of fact, there was hardly room for him to pass.

"Had an accident, miss?"

She looked at him scornfully.

"No; I do this for pleasure."

And then her eyes lifted and she saw John Stretton up above on his platform of timber.

He came down at once. He was happy with the happiness that had grown out of his new faith in the ultimate wholesomeness of the life which he was living. He had taken Rollin Beal's advice and had found it good. He was going twice a week to Romans Farm to spend a full evening there, and he had come to feel the growth of his friendship with the Viners, especially with Jess. In love he had become a Quietist. He wanted to love himself into her life and her into his, to make sure of the understanding which matters most in the comradeship of a man and a woman. If he could convince her that his idea of life was sound and that he could live to it, then surely his

love would be on the surest foundations. In this spirit he had resumed his loving of Jess, quietly, without restlessness, and with a smile in his eyes, and somehow he had come to feel that they were on more intimate terms with each other. He could talk to her now without self-consciousness, and he was discovering a new world in talking to her. He was astonished to find how much she knew. He had come by a number of new plans, and he found himself talking to her about them. He had been reading about home-grown tobacco, sugar beet and bee farms. He wanted to experiment. Jess knew not a little about bees, for she was a bee-mistress of no mean experience. At Romans they kept half a dozen hives in the orchard. She explained to John the contriving of the two harvests, first the gathering of the apple and May nectar, and later the juices of the heather. He brought his book on bees down to the farm and they conned it together with their heads very close. Old Viner and his wife looked across at each other with eyes of understanding.

"Jess can teach you more than any book."

Which was true, and not merely in the matter of bees.

Hence this new happiness of his, and his sense of growing security. And it was this happiness which looked from his eyes at Isobel Copredy. He was quite unafraid of her. It was as though he had forgotten.

"Anything wrong?"

He was aware of a growing pool of oil in the road under the car.

"Something's broken," she said, looking at him with a hard and interested stare, "and broken pretty badly."

"You'll want help?"

"Oh, that's coming. I asked a lad on a motor-bike who was going to Kingsbury to get Jollond to send out a car with a tow rope. Meanwhile——"

"We can get her to the side of the road."

He put the wagoner on to the back springs, and getting hold of the spokes of the off front wheel, he soon had the car straightened out at the side of the road. She stood and watched. She was aware of him as capable and strong and comely, and quite absorbed in the work of the moment. She might have been a man. He was not playing up to the woman in her; she realized that, and it annoyed her.

Also his air of happiness annoyed her. She felt that he had some reason to be pleased with life and with his handling of life. She guessed why.

“Can we do anything else—leave a message?”

He faced her frankly. When a man is happy and contented he bears no grudges and suspects no malice.

“Well, perhaps.”

She smiled. The game had opened. She was going to take him at his word.

“We may want some help here. Jollond may be here any minute. Could you stay?”

He was a little surprised, but she was in difficulties, and his frankness was penetrated with a feeling that he was still her debtor for the thing which had happened that night. He was wholly innocent in his good will. He thought, if he thought about it at all, that all that was dead and done with.

“Of course.”

He turned to the wagoner.

“You had better get on, Jervis. I’ll follow you.”

“I can’t unload this single-handed, sir.”

“All right. Wait till I come.”

Meanwhile she had raised the bonnet flap and was looking at the engine.

“Do you know anything about cars?”

“Nothing at all.”

She bent an intent and lustrous head.

“Isn’t that oil leaking out there?”

“Where?”

“From the crank-case, under the magneto.”

His head joined hers.

“I don’t know. There’s something dripping.”

“Oil,” she said, and reached in under the casing, to withdraw a hand blackened at the finger-tips, with a little pool of oil in its palm.

“Damn,” she said; “it is worse than I thought.”

The tool locker provided her with a clean rag, half a leg from a pair of discarded pyjamas belonging to her father, and she stood wiping her hands

on this piece of blue and white flannel. She did not look at Stretton, but she had him in the corner of her eye. He was with her, and yet not with her. He was fingering a pipe and staring down the road in the direction of Kingsbury. She understood at once that he wanted to follow the wagon.

"I'll keep him here," she thought, "as long as I jolly well can."

But it was not to be for long. A couple of men swung up in an American touring-car and took control of the situation. One of them was Jollond himself, a self-assured and loquacious person with a square jaw and a hard blue eye.

"Hear a noise, did you, Miss Copredy?"

"No small noise, like a big piece of metal banging about in the engine. I'm afraid the casing is cracked."

The mechanic was investigating. He turned his face sideways towards them with a smeary smile.

"It's cracked all right. Loose connecting rod, I guess."

Mr. Jollond got out the tow rope.

"Shall we drive you home, miss, first? The car will have to come with us."

"No, thanks," she said. "I'll walk."

Probably she was moved by a complex of many motives, sheer mischief, the desire of the huntress for something to hunt, malice, curiosity, an elemental liking for the man as a man. They set off together up the Willowmaston road, Stretton intent on overtaking the wagon, she persuaded that it would be amusing to take that look of absurd happiness out of his eyes. A game may begin as a game and end in play that is all too serious.

"Still farming?" she asked him.

She walked in the middle of the road and her eyes were on the same level as his. They were alone now, without that derelict car to act as a mechanical companion, and Stretton became acutely conscious of their loneliness. It was as though she meant him to feel it, and that she was making a wilful effort to embarrass him, to recall the adventure of three months ago. Whenever he looked at her her eyes held his. It was like the grasp of a hand.

"That was one of my new buildings going up," he told her, with his thoughts following the wagon.

“If I had been you,” she said, “I should have turned us out and taken Ottways.”

“The lease has a year to run.”

“Oh, well, next year. The pater has gone to London; I think he is rather fed up with the place. Turn us out.”

He managed to laugh, but he had the feeling that she was playing a game of blind man’s buff with him.

“That wouldn’t be very chivalrous.”

It was the very word she wanted and she pounced on it.

“Oh, chivalry! Is there such a thing? Surely not!”

“I think there is.”

She gave a queer little high-pitched laugh.

“Well, I have not struck it yet, but you say you have. I’m waiting.”

They were passing through a grove of elms whose leaves were beginning to fall in yellow flakes. The trees threw a gloom on the road, and Stretton had a sense of inward clouding. He felt that this young woman was exerting some vague yet menacing pressure upon him. He wanted to get away from her, and at the end of the avenue he fancied he saw the blue tail-board and red wheels of the wagon under its capping of white wood. Instinctively and perhaps without realizing it, he quickened his pace.

“Yes, there’s your wagon,” she said.

There was raillery in her voice. He tried to ignore it.

“The man can’t unload it single-handed.”

“No. It is a two-handed job. Exactly, I have always found men rather good at unloading wagons, throwing chivalry overboard, you know.”

His blank face showed that he did not understand her. They were within a furlong of Willowmaston village, and she slackened her pace and compelled him to hold back.

“Don’t hurry. You will be able to catch your beloved wagon somewhere between here and the cottage. I’m rather curious about certain things.”

He looked at her with the same blank face.

“What things?”

She repeated that little high-pitched laugh.

“Can’t you guess, Mr. Galahad?”

“No, I can’t,” he said, with the sudden doggedness of a man who is both puzzled and frightened.

They covered the next fifty yards in silence, and were close upon the red walls of Willowmaston before she gave him her stroke of the knife.

“I have been expecting you to come and see me.”

She was aware of a sudden tenseness in his figure.

“See you?”

“Surely.”

“You mean—to apologize—for that——”

“I think you did apologize,” she said, “and then I went away. Wasn’t that rather dignified of me? But when I came back——”

He turned on her suddenly.

“Look here, what the devil do you mean?”

“Thank you,” she said. “Please don’t get excited. When are you coming to see me?”

“I don’t see the necessity.”

“Think it over,” she retorted.

He was alarmed, a little bewildered, for she was suggesting with a certain sinister audacity that she meant far more than she had said. What was she hinting at? He felt a sudden chilliness in the pith of his spine, a quite violent desire to escape from her. She frightened him. He was not sufficiently brutal to deal with this sort of woman.

“I don’t understand you,” he said, his stag’s eyes searching for some possible escape.

“Really? I should have thought——”

And then, on the other side of Willowmaston green where the pollarded limes met the church wall, he saw the familiar governess-cart standing outside Mr. Honeyset, the saddler’s. A boy was holding the pony. Stretton had a conviction that Jessie Viner was in Mr. Honeyset’s shop with its Georgian bow window full of leather work, brushes, curry combs, whips, belts and tins of metal polish. He was ready to run to her like a child.

“Excuse me. There is somebody over there I want to see.”

He did not look at Isobel Copredy. He broke away with awkward brusqueness, diverging across the green, and walking with a speed that sought to put a space between him and any possible resumption of their argument. And she let him go. She had emptied her little phial of poison into his happiness, and she suspected that the effect would be cumulative. He was the sort of man who would worry himself to death over ambiguities that suggested everything and nothing.

She walked on, but at the upper end of the green she looked back. A girl was coming out of Mr. Honeyset’s shop. It was Jessie Viner.

XXIV

MALICE

To a man come occasions when the woman he loves becomes more vividly alive and appealing. These moments are sacred and unforgettable, and for some of them he can find a reason, but for others he can find no reason at all. It may be the particular colour of a particular dress, or the smell of wet woodlands after rain, or some vague thrill of pathos or of tenderness. The greater moments speak for themselves. What man has not some memory of a white and tragic face on a pillow, or two hurt eyes forgiving him for some fool adventure, or a hand touching his in the hour of disaster? And that was the feeling that Stretton had about Jess Viner when he saw her coming out of the doorway of the saddler's shop. It was as though he had never seen her before as she was and as he knew her to be. Everything about her was peculiarly soft and brilliant and convincing. He knew that to him she was like no other woman.

And he had fled to her. He had obeyed some natural impulse, and now he stood very still, looking at her as though she were beginning to fade from him. She had in her hands a piece of harness which old Honeyset had been mending. Her eyes smiled at him. A moment later he was aware of something questioning at the back of her smile.

"I saw the cart," he said.

She knew at once that something had hurt him. He was out of rhythm, awkward, self-conscious, and she wondered why. He had referred to the cart as though he were making an excuse, and making it rather lamely.

"Can you wait a minute?" she asked.

"The wagon is on ahead——"

"I have to go into Gentry's. I shan't be a minute. I can give you a lift."

"Thank you," he said, almost with the formality of a nervous man who is afraid that if he relaxes he will betray his nervousness.

She placed the harness in the cart, and Stretton went to the pony's head, sending the boy away with sixpence in his pocket. He saw Jess cross the green and disappear into Gentry's shop with its ancient white front jutting out from the red body of the house. She remained there less than half a

minute, and yet when she reappeared she seemed to have changed, or rather, his consciousness of her had taken on a fuller significance. For fear had entered into him, fear and a great yearning. There was a sinister shadow on the sunlit grass, the shadow of that other woman. He watched Jess with a quick and passionate tenderness and a little catch of despair that was born of a sharp, spiritual pain. The love in him uttered a cry of yearning. He wanted her. My God, how he wanted her! Not basely, not with brute selfishness, but as a lonely man stretches out unhappy hands to beauty and goodness and warmth and joy. And suddenly he had begun to fear that all this was impossible, that some shadow was falling between them.

"Well, I have not kept you long?"

She was smiling. Her face seemed aglow with all that he desired in her. He felt himself full of unmeasurable and poignant tenderness.

"No."

She looked at him quickly, with an air of inquiry, and his eyes fell away from hers. He rubbed the pony's nose, fondled it. She had heard a sound of grief in his voice.

"Shall I drive or will you?"

"Oh, you," he said, still without looking at her.

She climbed in and took the reins, and coming round from the pony's head he got in and sat opposite her. The pony broke into a trot, and the old red houses and the autumn trees of Willowmaston swam past them against the thin blue of the sky. Now and again Stretton stole a glance at her. She was sitting sideways, one hand holding the reins, the other resting on the side of the cart, her eyes looking ahead up the leaf-strewn road. For the moment she seemed unaware of him. She was deep in thought; she had removed herself to a distance. That was the sudden, tragic impression he had of her; of something infinitely precious and desirable and remote, something which he could never possess, something for which he yearned with an aching helplessness. Less than two hours ago he had been full of a happy sense of confidence. His quiet approach to her since his talk with Rollin Beal had seemed very real and satisfying, but now he was aware of this sense of distance. It was self created, and her very physical nearness to him made the feeling more vivid.

She was aware of his constraint and of his veiled and troubled glances. He was so poor a dissembler. There were reasons; she granted that: he might

be sensitive and difficult, but her heart was a partisan. She remained herself in spite of his lost speech.

"Leaves, falling leaves! I never mind the autumn."

He said that he preferred it to the spring. It had no illusions, and you felt that you could begin again.

"Oh, come," she said, and spread a smile over him, "we are not so old as all that."

His eyes lit up for a moment.

"Someone said to me not long ago, 'Never be sorry for yourself.' "

"Wise man. If you feel sorry for yourself you will be sorry. No, I'm not a prig."

"The very last thing you could be. I wonder what has become of Jervis and the wagon?"

"They came through Willowmaston as I drove in. But for that you would have found them down there still. The Green Man, you know. More suggestion!"

He laughed; he was relaxing a little.

"You can always suggest a thirst to most Britishers."

"In spite of the damp climate!"

"Perhaps that is suggestive."

They had reached the end of the beech avenue above the village, a great arcade of bronze and of gold soaring from pillars of a delicate, greyish blackness. The road was flaked with fallen leaves, and here and there a stretch of grass was made more vivid by the yellow scales that covered it. The solemn light of the avenue seemed to descend upon both their faces. And then ahead of them they saw a little figure in a green knitted coat, with a brown "Burberry" over its arm—Isobel Copredy on foot for Ottways.

Stretton had forgotten her, or rather he had forgotten that she was on the road ahead of them, a figure of discord and accusation. His face stiffened. His impulse was to slip out of the cart and disappear, anyhow and anywhere. His love made him a coward.

"Hallo," he heard Jessie's voice saying, "Miss Copredy! She passed me in her car. Quarrelled with it, perhaps?"

He heard his own voice answering mechanically.

“I passed it broken down below Willowmaston. Someone was going to tow it into Kingsbury.”

“I’m glad it wasn’t a horse.”

There was dislike in her voice—antagonism.

“I might offer her a lift, but I shan’t.”

The pony had dropped to a walk, and they gained slowly on the figure ahead of them. Once Stretton saw Isobel Copredy look round, and he realized that she had seen him. He was in a hurry to pass her and to escape, as a nervous horse swerves and dashes past some object in the road. She walked steadily on. He saw the swing of her skirt, the rather graceful movement of her feet, for she had the feet and the ankles of a dancer. She shifted the “Burberry” and flung it over her shoulder. Almost the action made him think of a bravo swinging his cloak aside before using his sword.

Slowly the cart drew level. Stretton saw her chin come round, and he was conscious of compelling himself to meet her eyes. But she did not look at him. The hard blue of her glance was for Jessie Viner, and there was a touch of insolence in it—insolence mingled with hostile curiosity. “So you are after him,” it seemed to say, “you nice, brown-eyed cow! But I can tell you something, young woman!” As for Jess, she looked down steadily and appraisingly at this other girl, as though her own dislike of her felt justified. And while these two young women were looking at each other Stretton sat as stiff as some waxwork figure in a show, unacknowledging and unacknowledged.

Soon they were past her, with their backs to her blue eyes and full-blooded face, but they had left behind them a doubled motive, a reinforced malice. Antipathy flashes quick as light, and perhaps it is quicker in its action and reaction between women than between men. So strong and instant was it in this case that neither woman would have asked for any reason or accepted any compromise. It is probable that Queen Eleanor would have felt moved to poison fair Rosamund even though her husband was not poor Rosamund’s lover.

And yet, as is often the way with humans, both Stretton and Jessie Viner glozed the thing over, and said nothing to each other of the girl whom they had passed. With Jess, perhaps, the feeling was too elemental to be voiced to a man. Isobel Copredy made her feel evil. Nor had John Stretton any desire to interfere with her silence.

“Get up, Bob,” she said, touching the pony with the whip.

It was rare for her to use the whip, and Bob broke into a surprised and spanking trot.

“Silly old thing,” she observed; “you are as sensitive as——”

She had almost said “as a man.” But not all men were sensitive, and her own man was sitting there as though he would never utter another word.

“Hallo, there’s the wagon,” she exclaimed a moment later; “but I may as well take you as far as our gate.”

He nodded.

“Unless the Rising Sun will get in Jervis’s eyes!” he said.

“Tell him it mustn’t. That sort of man has to be told such things, you know.”

For in dealing with the plain facts of life she was stronger than he was, which makes for a man’s salvation.

Ten minutes of Bob’s brisk trotting brought them to the end of the lane and the white gate, and Stretton got down here and opened the gate for her.

“Thanks for the lift. I think I will wait here for the wagon.”

She drove through, and then held the pony in while she spoke to Stretton over the back of the cart.

“You are coming down to-morrow night?”

“Of course. About six o’clock. Will that be too early?”

“No. I’ll show you my new hive. You ought to be able to copy it. It should be quite easy to make.”

She gave him a smile, and let the hungry and restive Bob trot on down the lane, while Stretton closed the gate and waited there for Jervis and the wagon. But he found himself possessed by a restlessness which would not let him remain still, and in the end he walked down towards the main road and met Jervis and his horses turning into the lane. They went up together over the heath, and unloaded the timber in the ride between the two pieces of woodland. Jervis struck Stretton as being rather sulky; dryness did not agree with him; he did not like working for a dry man.

“You won’t want me no more?”

“No. That’s all.”

Jervis turned his team, drew the back of a hand across his mouth, and journeyed back over the heath. Stretton saw the blue tail of the wagon disappear through the gap between the old thorn trees and dip down towards Romans Farm. He had escaped from his own too urgent thoughts during the unloading of the wagon, but now they assailed him again like noisy children who cannot be ignored. In fact, his thoughts had the quality of noise, irritating, distracting noise, and he rebelled against it.

"What rot! One imagines too much."

He went in to make tea, but even the welcoming bark of his dog had in it a note of discord.

"Quiet, old chap."

He had to insist on silence with a rather irritable "Lie down," and poor Paul slunk away and found a philosopher's corner in the wood shed. Men were moody creatures. There were times when you did not know how to take them.

Yet when the dog's depressed tail had disappeared round the edge of the door Stretton seemed to discover a sudden loneliness in the cottage. Its utter silence made itself felt. Never before had he quite realized this silence, its immobility, its peculiar individuality, its evenness. He stood by the grate, waiting for the kettle to boil, and looking about him with a vague sense of strangeness, of insecurity. He was assailed by queer, whimsical suggestions. There was nothing but "I" in the cottage. Nothing moved in it unless he moved it. The place was dead save for what his own hands vitalized. He came by the rather fantastic thought that but for him the furniture would remain exactly where it was, to be covered with dust and cobwebs, until it fell into dust. No one would wind the clock. He gave a protesting shake of the shoulders, and turned to the kettle, which had begun to boil. He decided that he would have tea in the sitting-room, and he carried the tray in there, to be struck by the seeming darkness of the room. The very furniture looked dim and unfamiliar, ghost furniture. He went and pulled back the curtains, to find that the sun had passed behind a bank of clouds, and that the heath itself looked suddenly grey and old.

He had seated himself on the sofa where he was reminded, and reminded most vividly, of that evening when Isobel Copredy had sat there with the rain and the sunlight in her hair. He became acutely and sensitively aware of the past. It was reborn in him and with a new significance. He got up hastily and took one of the arm-chairs.

“Surely she couldn’t mean——” he thought.

His face grew gloomy. He was half afraid to follow out the possible inferences her attitude implied. Why had she expected him to go and see her? It seemed to him unthinkable that she should wish to see him. He could not understand it, unless—— And here he paused, more and more conscious of a feeling of insecurity, of being in the dark and on the edge of some dangerous cliff. What motive could she have in wishing to see him, in demanding it almost as a right?

“I should have thought,” he reflected, “that she would never want to come near me again. Why can’t she let it be? These damnable memories!”

He felt that she lacked pride and that he had every right to ignore her. He swore that he would ignore her, and in making the resolution he inspired himself with a sense of decision. She was just a Pandora’s Box, a thoroughly irresponsible piece of mischief.

Presently he was able to shrug metaphorical shoulders at her. He wandered out on the heath and watched the sun emerge below the clouds with a magnificent redness. He found himself comparing Isobel Copredy with Jess, and thinking how wonderful it was that two creatures born of man and woman should be so different. His sense of distance from Jess began to melt away. He would see her to-morrow.

Next day his quietism had almost recovered itself. He worked hard, getting the ground ready for the new building. The sun shone; there had been a heavy dew, and the yellow bracken glistened with it. The freshness of the morning was the freshness of a new hope. The landscape had enlarged itself, and the sky seemed higher.

He worked hard till tea-time, and after tea he had a bath and put on his best suit. He had hardly thought at all of Isobel Copredy, but much of Jess. For in thinking of her he found a feeling of security, an atmosphere of pleasant and wholesome charm. She was like the things which a healthy and a sensitive man loves best, the freshness of an autumn morning, an orchard in flower, the blue of the hills before rain, fresh milk, fruit with the bloom upon it, a bird’s note at dawn, a day full of the zest of work waiting for clean hands. She seemed compounded of all these things. He loved her, and his love was good.

When dusk was falling he locked the cottage door and walked down the path to the gate. A moment ago he had seen this gate with its bars outlined black against the fading colours of heath and sky, but now someone was

standing there, a blurred figure in the dusk. His first thought was that it was Jessie Viner, and he was within five yards of the gate before he discovered his mistake. He was aware of another shape beside the girl's, that of a big dog sitting pressed close against her skirt, his muzzle thrust between the bars of the gate.

Stretton knew that there was nothing for him to do but to walk on. Probably she had been crossing the heath and had paused at the gate. That is what he suggested to himself, but somehow he did not believe it. She was leaning her crossed arms on the top of the gate and looking straight up the path towards him. He thought that there was irony, menace in this attitude of hers.

"Good evening."

"Were you coming to see me?"

He could distinguish her face clearly now, and gauge its expression as she asked him that question. He saw the shine of her eyes and teeth. The dog gave a low growl, and she administered a flick with her foot.

"Quiet! Well, were you coming to see me?"

He looked at her eyes.

"No," he said. "No."

He fancied that she smiled, but it did not seem to him that there was any mirth in that smile. She had the appearance of barring the way. Her white teeth were like the white teeth of her dog.

"I just wondered. I thought that I would give you till to-night. And wearing your nice Bond Street suit and the front door key in your pocket!"

She looked at him with level, merciless eyes.

"Romans Farm, is it?"

He nodded.

"And the farmer's pretty daughter?"

This time he made no sign. His face had gone white and stiff.

She put her head back, and he saw the shadows in her nostrils, and her narrowed lids mocking and full of menace.

"I thought so. But, really, you can't go there."

He blurted the obvious retort.

“That is my affair.”

“Oh, no, pardon me, I share it. You can’t go down there. If you ask me I will tell you why.”

He had a moment of fear mingled with exasperation.

“Why not?”

“Isn’t it a question of decency? Besides, there is something else.”

He became more and more conscious of the menace in her.

“What do you mean?”

“I suppose you remember part of the evening when you behaved like a wild beast?”

“Why drag in that?”

“Why? Because you don’t seem to realize the sort of man you are. You don’t seem to realize that something else happened. I suppose you would plead lapse of memory.”

He took a step towards the gate, but she put out a warning hand.

“No. There is going to be no repetition of that sort of thing. My dog is rather savage.”

“What do you mean? Tell me.”

She remained silent for a moment, as though to tantalize him, or to emphasize her own seriousness, but when she began to speak again her voice was casual yet hard. It was like pouring poison drop by drop into a cup. She saw Stretton stiff and motionless in the middle of the path. He looked bewildered, stupefied.

“I don’t believe it,” he said.

There was a passionate protest in his voice, and yet his own heart misgave him. Could he be sure that what she said was not true, and that he had a complete recollection of all and of everything?

“You will have to believe it.”

She removed her arms from the gate and stood back a little.

“I am not asking you to consider me. I have a pride of my own. My luck is that I don’t need your consideration. But, of course, if you have any sentiment——”

He remained voiceless, and with a side-glance at him in the dusk she went on.

“I might forgive you that, but I am not going to forgive your lack of conscience in playing around that other girl. Don’t you see that you can’t do it?”

He made some sort of sound, and she chose to find in it a note of defiance.

“If you refuse to see it I shall have to make you see it. Women should hang together. You will give up going to that farm.”

His eyes stared at her blankly.

“But——”

“If you go I shall tell her.”

“You will tell her,” he repeated dully.

“Of course. Have no doubt about that.”

He seemed to hesitate for a moment, with his head bowed down and his hands hanging limply. Then he turned about, walked to the door of the cottage, unlocked it, and going in closed the door.

XXV

THE SOUND OF A GUN

At Romans Farm Jess Viner waited, sitting by the window with her work in her lap. It was too dark for her to work now, and as the red glow faded in the west, the lane itself became dim and obscure, but she still remained there, waiting for this shy lover.

With a whirring of wheels the old clock in the hall struck seven.

Jess stood up. She leaned with her hands upon the window-sill and looked out into the vagueness of the night. The sky was clear and the stars shining, and little splinters of dim light broke upon the window-panes or touched the white slats of the fence. She could see the hedges, trees and farm buildings as mere solid masses of darkness against the sky.

"I wonder?" she thought, and then the opening of a door broke in upon her reflections and let an oblong patch of light into the room.

It was her mother who had entered.

"What, all in the dark?"

Jess remained at the window.

"Shall I get the lamp?"

"In a minute."

Her mother bent down to put a match to the fire; the day had been warm and the fire had not been needed.

"Mr. Stretton not come?"

"No."

"Maybe he has been working late."

"I think he works too hard."

Her mother made no comment upon this, yet there was a quiet sympathy between these two women, and each knew what the other might have said. The dry wood was crackling in the grate, and the young flames springing up, and Mary Viner remained on her knees watching the flames as though they had an undying fascination for her. She heard Jess moving in the room behind her. A moment later she heard her daughter go out into the hall.

There was the opening of a door, and a draught of cold air touched the spreading flames close to Mary Viner's knees. Their light played upon her face. It was attentive, thoughtful, faintly sad.

"She has gone out to meet him?"

She continued on her knees, and there was something of resignation and of appeal in her attitude.

"Well, well, it's natural. A girl must choose. But he's difficult, a little queer."

Jess was in the lane. She had not troubled to put on a hat and coat, for she had told herself that she would go no farther than the white gate, but when she reached the gate and stood resting her arms upon it something was added to her impulse. Before her spread the swarthy void of the heath. The dark thorn hedges rose on either side of her. She could smell the autumn smell of them and it had a suggestion of sadness. The stars blinked overhead. She was aware of the silence, a silence that was unbroken.

And he had not come. She wondered why, feeling that he would not come and that that strange and difficult shyness of his had returned. For a long while now she had been puzzled by it, but lately it had ceased to puzzle her, rather, there was something in him which had to be guessed at and understood, and she was trying to understand it.

"I wonder?" she thought.

But she did not remain content with wondering. She had strength and that warm courage which dares rather than reflects, nor was she self-consciously shy of her own motives. Instead of brooding she opened the gate and began to make her way over the heath. After the first hundred yards of following the uncertain trackway through the furze and heather she had a point of light to guide her, a light in one of Stretton's windows.

Meanwhile, up yonder, another woman had been sitting in the heather outside John Stretton's gate, her dog curled up beside her, with his muzzle on her knee. Isobel Copredy could see the vague space of the cottage doorway, but she trusted more to the alertness of her dog to warn her of any movement beyond the hedge. Moreover, Stretton had lit a lamp and that suggested the stay at home, unless he was trying to be cunning. She waited there for an hour, until she saw a second light moving in the upper part of the cottage, and that seemed to her final. She had remained there with the idea of discovering the potency of her poison. She had driven the man-thing back into his burrow and he had not dared to emerge.

“It works,” she thought, and getting up silently took a turn of the dog’s leash round her wrist and made off southwards over the heath. And so it happened that these two women passed each other, but at such a distance that Isobel’s dog did not prick up his ears and warn her. They went by like two shadows in the night, neither suspecting the presence of the other.

When Jess reached the cottage she paused there with her eyes on the lighted window. The blind was up and the curtains undrawn, and almost she was persuaded that any moment that light might be quenched, and she would hear the opening and closing of the door and Stretton’s footsteps coming down the path. He had been working late; that was the explanation. He intended coming to the farm for supper. But as the minutes went by and the light continued to burn steadily in his sitting-room, she began to doubt and to wonder. It was something more than curiosity that moved her silently to open the gate and make her way to the window.

The lamp was burning on the round oak table in a far corner of the room, nor did it give a very bright light, for it was turned low and covered with a shade. Stretton was in the arm-chair by the fireplace, but the fire was unlit. He was sitting there perfectly still, leaning forward slightly, his elbows on his knees, his head between his hands. She could not see his face, but somehow she could imagine it. And she was shocked, for this was not an attitude of meditation, but sheer, motionless misery, of soul-searching helplessness. She was sure of it. To her it was a picture without words, and her heart divined the meaning of it.

She breathed softly, held back in the outer darkness and waited. She was waiting for some movement, some sign of purpose and of will force, but it did not come. He remained sitting there just as she had first seen him, and it seemed to her that never had she seen a human figure remain so still. She sensed a stricken pathos in his stillness, the rigid outlines of a tragedy.

She faced her own problem. What was she to do? Tap at the window and challenge him, break the spell of his stillness and then ignore what she had seen?

Somehow she felt that she could not do it, that she had no right to do it. She was in the position of a spy, an innocent spy whose impulse was to lay soft hands upon the man’s unhappiness. But in her there was some deeper wisdom, a sensitive restraint, a feeling that a confession that was provoked was not what either she or the man in yonder would desire. If he had a secret was she to surprise it like some raw schoolgirl jumping out and crying “Bo” from behind a door? That he had a secret, some tragic disharmony in this

lonely life of his, she was sure, but she felt as a man might have felt, that the choice should be his, natural and inevitable, not angled for with a feminine pin.

She went back a step or two, and as she did so she saw Stretton move. For a moment she stood rigid, holding her breath. The dog Paul was asleep beside his chair, and she saw Stretton bend down, pick up the dog and take him on his knees.

There was something poignant and infinitely distressful in that act of his. She gave him a last compassionate glance, and made her silent way back to the gate. In a little while she was standing in the porch of Romans Farm, and she loitered there a moment before going in.

Tom Viner was reading the paper before the fire, and his wife sat sewing by the lamp. The table was laid for supper.

Neither pretended to notice Jess' absence or blundered into asking her where she had been. The clock struck eight.

Old Viner put his paper aside.

"Well, what about supper, mother?"

"When you please, Tom."

The three of them sat down round the table, and no one ventured to refer to the fourth place which Stretton had left empty.

A week went by and Stretton did not come to the farm, nor did he send any message by the boy. Less comfortable people than the Viners might well have taken offence at his casual whimsies, but comfortable people are in no hurry to judge. Moreover, both Tom and his wife understood that Jess was involved in Stretton's eccentric shynesses, and Jess showed no signs of petulance.

There had been some talk between her and her mother. Any possible element of discord had vanished after that talk.

"He is very unhappy, and unhappy people are difficult."

Her mother was moved to question his unhappiness and its cause.

"You don't know, I suppose? He's not ill."

"No. Some men don't talk easily. I respect him for that. But I should like him to tell me."

“Ah,” said her mother with an intent look, “some secret or other. And you——”

Her daughter nodded, and then kept her head bent over her work.

“It keeps him away.”

“It shouldn’t, unless——”

Jess raised her eyes, and the appeal that was within them touched the woman in Mrs. Mary. They were good friends, these two. And the daughter’s eyes said as plainly as could be, “Please don’t meddle. Trust me. I think I know that it is not easy either for him or for me.”

Her mother left it at that, though she discussed the affair with her man before blowing out the bedroom candle. Their attitude towards John Stretton and his queerness was inspired largely by their faith in Jess. She had been always a girl with character, and as far as they knew she had never been interested in any man. And yet there was a danger in the newness of the experience.

“I don’t think Stretton would want to hurt her,” said her man. “I’ve watched them together. He looks at her as though she were too good to be touched.”

“He’s shy of her?”

“For some reason of his own. That’s my feeling. Let them try to settle it between them. I don’t believe in meddling.”

“Nor do I,” said his wife, “but I want my girl to be happy.”

It was known at Romans that Stretton was not ill, for he was working and working hard, but Jess was the only one who suspected that he took his work as a man takes a drug. Sometimes when she went out on the heath and the wind was in the right direction she could hear the sound of hammering, and on other days she saw him as a little figure in the field below the wood, digging and digging with steady obstinacy. Then the weather changed and heavy rains set in, and so far as the farm was concerned Stretton was neither seen nor heard.

He seemed lost in the rain up yonder, in the grey of the low scudding clouds, in the falling of the dead leaves. It was as though the wilderness had engulfed him. Yet he continued to work out of doors; if he got wet through, what did it matter? If he lived on tea and tinned meat and jam and cheese, what did it matter? He was too unhappy to trouble himself with the so-called minor details of life. When a man’s mind is sick he is apt to forget his body.

Yet things happened to him. He was like a man trying to swim in a rough sea and making no headway. He was without purpose or decision; he could not see the land for which he was making; he even doubted whether there was such land. His too fine sensitiveness was all against him, and he did not know quite enough about life and about women.

Young Rugglesworth, who brought his milk and his letters, was the only male creature whom he saw for ten whole days, and he even avoided seeing this boy.

Yet things happened; they happened within him, and with such passion and fierceness that he was approaching that state when a man is not quite sane.

For each evening she came across the heath, wet or fine, and just when darkness was falling, with that infernal dog of hers loping at her heels. She would stop at his gate and lean her arms upon it. She never spoke to him. She behaved like a ghost which had set out to haunt him, an evil spirit which it was impossible to exorcise.

It was incredible and yet it was true. He had a feeling of being surrounded by her, penetrated by her, tempted by her. She was reducing him to subjection. She was playing a very advanced and original game of cat and mouse, partly because it amused her, partly out of devilry, partly because the man in him piqued her.

He had moments of utter gloom and moments of exasperation. And one evening his exasperation had its way. He was haunted by the thought that some evening one of the Viners would come up and find her hanging over his gate.

He went down and spoke to her.

“Why the devil do you come here?”

“Because it amuses me,” she said.

He felt himself rather helpless in the presence of her cynicism.

“Why not keep away?”

“Because you might go trespassing.”

He understood her and he flared. He had an instant answer to that, the angry answer of a generous man.

“Do you think that I would go there now? Do you think I would mix her up with you?”

“Be careful,” she said. “I think I hold the whip.”

He was shaking in the dusk, but suddenly a certain thought came to him, and he felt himself stiffen. It was one of those madly sane thoughts which possess a man because they are final and convincing.

“I warn you,” he said, “I’m not going to stand this.”

He had a gun in the cottage and a few cartridges which he kept for shooting rabbits, and next day he loaded the gun and laid it ready on the window-sill.

That evening the sky was clear, with a touch of frost in the air and the stars very bright. She was later than usual, and as she came over the heath she sang snatches of some song, and her voice suggested mockery and defiance. Stretton was sitting on the sofa with the window half open, but when he heard her voice he got into a kneeling position and picked up the gun. He saw her come to the gate. The upper part of her figure was clear and distinct.

He fired above and to the right of her. The flash stabbed the darkness, and the crash of the report reverberated in the woods. He saw that she had disappeared from the gate, for some of the pellets had whipped into the hedge less than two yards from where she had been standing.

Stretton pushed the window wide open, and leaning out, called to her:

“That was in the air. Next time it will be your dog.”

She did not answer him at once for she was rather badly scared, but she had a passion for the last word.

“That’s bluff,” she shouted; “look out, or I’ll call it.”

“You had better not,” he said, closing the window.

He was strung up, all nerves, coiled like a spring, just as he had been on bad nights in the trenches. He was opposing something, fighting it, waiting to be attacked or to attack. She did not appear again at the gate, but he re-opened the window and knelt there listening. His chin, lips and nostrils were sharp and cruel. He was determined to shoot that dog of hers if she had the audacity to return. In fact the impulse to shoot her was very near the surface of his consciousness.

“We’ll see,” he thought, kneeling there and gripping the gun.

He had a feeling that she might still be lurking there and that she would return, and he was almost savagely determined to prove to her that he was

not bluffing. He waited. He could hear nothing. He was ready to wait there all night.

Yet a man's vision is limited. Stretton had fired that shot to scare the devil, and it did not occur to him at the moment that the sound of it might light on the ears of his good angel. Jess, coming back from Willowmaston, heard it as she reached the Romans Farm gate. It was no rare sound, but it was rare at such an hour, and from the direction of Mascall's Wood.

She met her father coming across from the buildings. He too had heard the shot and been puzzled by it, and as they stood together, listening, the same thought occurred to both.

"From Mr. Stretton's?"

"What is he doing out with a gun at this hour?"

Viner was not a wordy man, and when something called him he took the direct path. He felt what Jess felt, and it was sufficient.

"Go in, child."

He walked away up the lane, and she knew whither he was bound. Halfway up the heath he was passed by someone in the darkness, but his blunt "Who's that?" brought nothing but the growl of a dog. The two shapes disappeared, and being a sensible man he did not chase shadows but went on towards Mascall's Wood. Reaching the gate, and leaning over it to lift the latch that was on the inside, he had what would have been to any man a rather astonishing experience.

"I tell you I'll shoot."

The voice came from the cottage, the voice of a man under the influence of some great excitement. Old Viner sang out at once.

"Hallo, there, Mr. Stretton."

He waited, holding the gate open with one hand, thoroughly astonished and trying to grasp the situation. A moment later he heard the cottage door open, and Stretton came out, but he did not advance down the path.

"Is that you, Mr. Viner?"

"Sure. We heard the sound of a gun up here, and—well, you know, I just wondered——"

There was a short silence. Then Stretton spoke, and his voice sounded strangely weak and tired.

“Oh, that’s all right. I’ve seen someone hanging about here and I just fired to scare the bird.”

“What, a tramp or a gipsy?”

“Something of that breed. I’m sorry to have dragged you all the way.”

“No trouble at all. Come back with me and have supper?”

And then the man by the cottage blurted out some foolish and involved excuse, and turning towards the door, wished Thomas Viner good night.

The farmer echoed it and closed the gate, and that was all that these two men said to each other, but if Thomas Viner had not used his voice he had used his wits, and his conjectures troubled him. He felt responsible, soberly responsible.

At home, where the supper table was laid, and the lamplight showed him Jess looking at the fire, he made light of the incident.

“Oh, nothing. Mr. Stretton thought he had a sneak thief around the place, and that it would be a joke to give him a broad hint.”

But later, when he and his wife were alone together, he had more to say, and his face was serious.

“There is something very wrong with that lad. He ought to be looked to. I shall go down and see Mellor.”

“You mean he’s——”

“Oh, not quite that,” said her man, “but his brother gave me a hint or two. I think Mellor ought to know.”

XXVI

MIST

JESSIE VINER knew that Mellor of Kingsbury had been to see John Stretton, for the doctor left his car outside the white gate at the end of the lane and walked over the heath to Mascall's Wood. Jess saw the car, and she also saw Mellor come back and go down towards the buildings to speak to her father. Tom Viner was in the big barn, and Jess saw them standing in the doorway talking. Mellor remained there for about ten minutes.

For the moment she felt herself a spectator, a listener, and yet when her father came in to his tea he seemed to have some unspoken message for her. He looked at her with his kind, calm eyes. He even teased her a little, and she knew that when this mood was upon him he had no trouble on his mind. Whatever Mellor had said to him she divined that it had been reassuring.

In fact, Mellor had observed very little in Stretton that could cause the doctor in him to stand on the alert. He had not gone as the doctor, but as a friend of Rollin Beal's paying a friend's call, a call, as he expressed it, that should have been made months ago. He sat in Stretton's living-room, smoked a couple of cigarettes, and gossiped. He was a big, blond, easy creature with an abundance of human tact, a man whom other men loved instantly, a man who sat deeply and comfortable in a chair and never on the edge of it. Stretton was at ease with him, yet he did not talk much. They spoke rather of impersonal things, Mellor in his deep, confident, gentle voice, Stretton a little shyly. Mellor admired the cottage and its setting. He never hinted at its loneliness. He thought Stretton a little thin and fine drawn, but with a thinness that might be accounted for by overwork. Hard physical labour has that effect upon those who are not born and bred to it. There was a touch of asceticism on Stretton's face, a little frown on the forehead, a suggestion of self-suppression in the eyes. He was living a hard, clean life, and for a sensitive and lonely man such a life is not easy. But Mellor found nothing abnormal in him, nothing sinister. The surface might be a little tense and brittle, but it seemed sound.

"Come down and look me up some day."

Stretton said that he would. He was drawn to this big, blue-eyed man who gave one no sense of hurry.

"Choose a Sunday. I'm always in to tea on Sundays."

Mellor told Thomas Viner that if there was any trouble at all it was due probably to overwork and loneliness.

"Does he drop in and see you?"

"Sometimes. But he is queer about it. Says he will come, and then stays away."

"Shyness."

"It may be."

"Get him down. It will do him good."

Mellor was so disinclined to take a gloomy view of Stretton's mentality that he did not write to Rollin Beal. Much might have been prevented and explained had letters passed between these two men, but then a woman might have been cheated of her handiwork, and a woman's hands may be wiser than men's brains.

For Jess had begun to understand. Love may see more, or it may see less than the coldly normal eye, and John Stretton was being starved. He was starving himself as fine sensitive men have starved themselves in all ages for some shred of honour, some spiritual ideal, or some piece of loyalty. He was against himself. He simply could not do what the majority of less fine-tempered men would have found the doing of absurdly easy. And so he suffered.

For it might have been so easy. He was the prisoner of his own ideals, of his fastidious sense of what was right and desirable and honest. Even if he realized that life and its work-a-day street corner honour was very different from his own way of feeling and reacting to things, he could not step down to that lower level. It was not religion or wisdom which held him back; it was simply what was in him, the way he was built.

For he made the mistake which so many sensitive men make, he misjudged woman. He did not realize the strength of the sex in them, the power of the elemental appeal. He thought them colder, far more fastidious and tranquil than they are. He was still obsessed by many crude notions, by an idea of exaggerated purity, by a dread of shocking some imaginary snow goddess. He felt that it was impossible for him to tell any woman of the net of falsity and innuendo and suggestion which Isobel Copredy had thrown over him. He thought that any ordinary woman would be shocked by such a confession. He did not realize that if she had the heart and the courage to care she would tear the other woman's net to tatters, fiercely yet

compassionately, and with infinite exultation. For when the deeps call, your true woman will always rush to rescue her man.

Meanwhile those excursions to his gate had ceased. He did not quite know what to make of the relief, whether that half-mad act of his had been so convincing that my lady kept away. It had seemed to him that nothing could frighten her. The truth was that he had frightened her, and that she was casting about for a safer and more subtle weapon with which to wound him. Some natures derive pleasure from inflicting pain, and the weapon was very ready to Isobel Copredy's hand.

To leave a person in suspense, to hold him in doubt, to threaten with a threat! To pretend to be morally indignant, proud, careful of other people's happiness! All this was easy.

And so she wrote him a letter.

It was a clever letter. It put him down in the ditch; it dared him to emerge from it and carry mud into some other woman's life. It showed an extreme ingenuity in putting him in the wrong, everywhere and in every way. It played upon his sensitiveness, his poignant consciousness of his own inward blemish. It pretended to that modern honesty and frankness which can be so cruel. It aimed a blow at all his illusions while assuming many fine illusions of its own.

"Remember," it said, "I am a woman and I stand by my sex. I am not going to have another woman's life made a problem. I take your promise for granted. Otherwise I shall chip in."

He read that letter one November afternoon when the world was very grey and the leaves were falling. There was a white mist abroad, a queer, fickle mist which ran into strange cliffs and promontories, and spread itself in mysterious pools. Half the heath would be shrouded in it, the other half clear and free, and the line of parting would be sudden and surprising. Romans Farm was hidden. At one time the mist came up to Stretton's hedge and stopped there as though some great hand had made a gesture of "no farther." In the woods the trees dripped steadily, and the bracken was the colour of rusted iron and of gold.

When Stretton had read that letter he burnt it, and went out on to the heath. He became involved in the mist, but he was hardly aware of it, for he was trying to grope his way through an emotional fog. He wandered over heather, brushed against wet gorse bushes, and skirted round spectral thorns and birch trees which emerged suddenly out of the mist. He had no sense of

physical direction, but his spiritual sense of direction seemed to become more and more clear.

He realized that he would have to give up the thought of Jessie Viner; that he would have to keep away from her. He could not tell her what Isobel Copredy swore to be true, and if he could not tell Jess that what right had he to go near her? He did not know whether to believe Isobel Copredy or to disbelieve her. He could not understand a girl in her position inventing such a thing. She could have no motive——

He sat down in the wet heather and faced the choice of surrendering all that of which he had dreamed. He was acutely miserable, humiliated, very lonely. He wanted Jess as he had never wanted her before; he wanted the healing spirit in her.

Yet his decision was that a man has no right to cast a shadow. It is better that he should keep out of the sunlight, and so avoid the casting of shadows on other people's happiness. If he had had some beastly physical disease would he have dared to think of approaching her?

But the decision was cumulative. It provoked the thought that he could not go on living up here. The health and the healing and the hope had gone out of his life in the wilderness. He felt that he could not bear the new and fatal loneliness that would descend on him. To be shut out of Romans Farm, to have no single human being of intelligence to whom he could speak! Besides, the provocation, the tantalizing hunger of it, with her so near! And what would they think?

He began to see that he would have to give up and go away. Or struggle on, growing so desperate that he might fall to Isobel Copredy.

And then the sudden thought struck him, had she had that in her mind, was it possible that she foresaw the leap of a desperate and burning man into any water that might cool him? Did she count on him being so much a man that some day he would come savagely craving for that which she, and the woman, could give?

The thought shocked him, suggesting as it did a glimpse of some unlovely future, a life touching the edge of degeneration and depravity. He was essentially clean, with a natural hatred of all that was sodden and smeary, and as he sat there he seemed to see himself dragged down by some sex disharmony, coarsened, blunted, driven from woman to woman. But he broke the thread of this morbid brooding, and jumping up, began to wander on over the heath. The mist was thicker than ever, and though he set his face

in what he imagined to be the right direction, he soon realized that he was lost. Every furze bush looked the same, and there were no paths to guide him.

"If I walk on long enough," he reflected, "I shall come to something."

The ground ran fairly level, and he knew that to reach Mascall's Wood he ought to be walking uphill, but he held on, knowing that in time he would strike a hedge, or some familiar landmark, or reach the edge of the heath. He had been walking for ten minutes when he came quite suddenly upon a few scattered thorn trees and a stretch of grass, and he seemed to remember the outlines of the thorns. He walked on. Faint lines showed in the grass, and a moment later he realized that they were wheel tracks. He had come out at the very place where the Romans Farm lane died away at the edge of the heath.

The white gate was a little to his left, and he would have to pass it in picking up the path to Mascall's Wood. The mist lay heavy and silent, but as he walked quickly over the grass he heard the click of the gate. He was right upon it, and he saw its whiteness swing towards him through the film of vapour.

They had come upon each other so suddenly in the mist that Jess saw John Stretton's face in all the nakedness of its emotion. There was no premeditation here, no conscious posing, no setting of the stage. They had met like two ships in a sea fog.

"Jess!"

His heart had been so full of Jessie Viner that the sudden presence of her was like the materialization of his own vision. He was taken utterly unawares. He stretched out a hand to touch her, but he did not touch her. She was conscious of his great, hungry eyes and stammering mouth. His love was a lamp which could not be hidden.

"I got lost," he said.

Her eyes seemed covered with a film of light.

"On the heath?"

"I—I did not know I was here."

"Well, you are not lost now."

She had a hand on the gate. She was overpowered by the sense of the nearness and the urgency of his need of her. She vibrated to it. She was

aware of him as something blind and helpless and inarticulate.

"Won't you come back with me, John?"

He looked at her, and he did not speak. She saw his lips move. It was as though some hand were dragging him back from a doorway, closing the door and shutting out the light. A kind of deadness seemed to fall upon his face. His eyes made her think of a man dying, a man whose heart cried out against death while his lips remained mute.

"I can't," he blurted.

She remained quite still. The silence was like a wave poised before breaking. Suddenly he caught at the gate with both hands as though he needed a grip upon something hard and tangible. His arms and body stiffened. Then he seemed to thrust himself off. His eyes swept her face. She knew that he was going back into the night.

"I can't," he said, and fled.

She let him go. She might have called him back, yet the thing which restrained her was stronger and more wise than either of them knew.

But from that moment she understood. He wanted her, as no other man had wanted her, as no other man would ever want her. She vibrated to his dear necessity. She was not afraid of it. Nothing but his silence stood between them.

XXVII

SILENCE

YES, but what a silence! She knew now that there must be some almost tragic reason for it, and in her heart of hearts she did not care perhaps what that reason was. He was hungry, he was thirsty, and she was food and drink. His need of her—the woman in her understood that need—filled her with a quite indescribable tenderness, a desire to open her arms, to give him all that he lacked, all that he hungered for. His love was no gross thing, no mere appetite, but it was passionate as a great and wholesome love is passionate. He wanted her, soul and body, bosom and heart, thoughts and hands, laughter and lips. He wanted every bit of her, in the rising and setting of the sun, in the heat of the day, in eating and sleeping, in those moments of silence when nothing is said and everything understood. She felt all this, and was thrilled by it, penetrated by it. A woman conceives love as she conceives a child. It becomes her, spirit and flesh.

But she considered this silence of his and the meaning of it, and here her intuition touched hands with the sensitive and half feminine wisdom of Rollin Beal. It was not she who should break that silence. It was the man's right, his duty. She might work for it, wisely, tenderly, removing a little of the barrier piece by piece, but the last blow of the pick must come from him. Much of her was involved in this, her pride and her feeling for his pride, her sense of rightness, her subtle appreciation of what was positive and courageous in the male. The man advances, the woman retreats or waits to parley. There is such a thing as snatching away a man's privilege and so making him in some subtle way a little less than a man. A sensitive and a proud man would feel that. It might leave a little streak of shame in him, a sense of disharmony. He had got to convince her in order to convince himself. He had to open the door and not have it opened for him.

That cry of "I can't" must change to "I must, I will," else she would have failed with his failure. That was what she felt.

Meanwhile she was full of conjectures, tender curiosity. She did not meet him for a week; he remained invisible, a thing of perplexing uncertainties. Sometimes she saw him working in the field on the edge of the wood, a little distant figure, problematical and solitary. It seemed to her that he worked less fiercely than of old, that he moved more slowly. His heart was not in it.

As a matter of fact, Stretton continued working much as modern man goes to meals, not because he is hungry, but because meals have become a habit. He felt that if he stopped working the whole machinery of his life would fall to pieces. He had nothing left him but this habit of work. He dug, he hammered at his new sheds, he cut firewood, he cooked and washed and cleaned, but all the while he had the feeling that all this activity was as futile as the whirling of a squirrel in a cage. It led to nothing, at least to nothing that mattered.

For man cannot live by work alone. He must have his work crowned by comradeship. He must play, think, dream, make love. The perfume of life comes from within. No mere socialization of labour on material lines is going to make men happy. One might as well expect to make a machine happy by oiling it. And Stretton was more than unhappy; he was very near to breaking point. He told himself continually that the only thing for him to do was to give up and clear out, and try some other sort of adventure elsewhere. He found the evenings and the nights intolerable. He was sick with loneliness and desire.

But having made the decision he could not bring himself to the point of action.

He wrote to Rollin Beal, and then tore up the letter. He wrote to Carlyon, and this letter shared a like fate.

On one dim November afternoon he came very near to flight. In fact he packed a suit-case, turned Virginia adrift, locked up the cottage, and taking Paul with him, started off over the heath. His idea was to catch a night train from Kingsbury to London, though how London would help him he did not know. He was both excited and afraid. Yet as he trudged over the heath in the dusk he saw a light shine out suddenly below him, a light in one of the windows of Romans Farm. He hesitated. He set his suit-case down in the heather and watched the light. The dog lay down beside the suit-case and waited upon the whims of the man.

Presently they turned back. They retraced their steps to the cottage; the door was unlocked, the lamp lit, and Paul as though completely puzzled, stood and sniffed at the suit-case which his master had placed on a chair. What an absurd adventure, absurdly begun and absurdly ended! Stretton came back from lighting the kitchen fire and found Paul's nose questioning the suit-case.

Stretton saw the humour of the thing, its ridiculous pathos.

“It must seem pretty silly to you, old chap.”

The dog’s eyes looked up at the man’s. He wagged a tail. He might have answered, “Oh, well, you know, unless we fellows were a bit foolish at times we should be awful prigs.”

Anyhow, Stretton picked the dog up and fondled him. He felt that if he did not let loose some of the human yearning that was in him he would go mad.

More days passed, dim, mist-laden days, melancholy and very still. It was as though the sun had taken off his golden sandals, muffled himself in a cloak, and now crept across the sky on bare and silent feet. For a while Jessie Viner did not see the man, and then the strangeness and the unexpectedness of her way of seeing him came as a shock to her.

The weather had changed. A steady frost had set in, and the nights were brilliant and very still. The trembling of the stars seemed part of the trembling of her troubled self.

A moon came and made a vigil that had been vague and impossibly patient, certain and vivid.

She did not know what to do; she was greatly moved, shaken with compassion.

About that time Mary Viner fell sick with influenza. The Rugglesworths had started it, or rather, the carter had collected it from the Rising Sun and brought it to the cottages. Sam was sent down to Kingsbury for Dr. Mellor. Now Mellor was very busy, for influenza had spread through the scattered farms and cottages, and his day’s work was never done. He voyaged up muddy lanes, trudged across fields, and ended his pilgrimage by moonlight. He was elusive and difficult to catch. On that particular day he did not reach Romans Farm till seven o’clock, and by that time Tom Viner had sickened and joined his wife in bed.

Jess waited for the doctor at the foot of the stairs.

“I have some hot supper ready for you, Dr. Mellor.”

His blue eyes looked tired in his grizzled blond head.

“Now that’s kind of you. As a matter of fact, I need it. If one goes too long without food, you know, when you are in and out of sick rooms, you are apt to go down yourself.”

“I know. Come in to the fire. What do you think of my two patients?”

“I don’t think there is any need for you to worry.”

As a country doctor who was much loved Mellor was always on the edge of being overworked, and even his fine physique and healthy good temper could not stave off a tiredness which was irritable. Jess let him alone. She sat him down to a good hot meal, and went upstairs with some milk for her two patients, but she was back again before Mellor had touched the biscuits and cheese. He smiled at her. He felt better. He did not suspect her of any ulterior motive.

She took her needlework and sat down by the fire, yet, though in her wisdom she had no desire to vex with questions a tired and hungry man, she had her web spun for him, the most innocent of webs.

“I suppose I was right in lighting a fire in their room?”

“Absolutely.”

“It is very cold to-night.”

“It is. Several degrees, I should think. I have had a day of it. My man went sick this morning, and I have been my own chauffeur.”

“Double work! Did you know that you left the lights burning on your car?”

“Did I?”

“I switched them off.”

Mellor helped himself to biscuits and cheese. If he thought of Jess at all, he was aware of her as a comfortable and comely young woman with a great deal of common sense, a pleasant voice, and rather beautiful hair. An admirable comrade for some lucky man! He was quite unprepared against being ambushed by her at eight o’clock on a winter evening.

“About medicine,” he said.

“It is rather late to-night. I could send the boy down first thing in the morning.”

“That’s all right. I carry a few drugs with me. I have left some tablets upstairs.”

“Milk diet, I suppose? And you will want their temperatures taken. I have a thermometer.”

“Excellent,” he said, with a smiling and indulgent glance at her.

She put her work aside and rose.

“You will be ready for your coffee in a minute?”

“Am I to have coffee?”

“Of course.”

She prepared to use the web of ministrations she had spun about him. She went out to the kitchen and brought in the coffee. He was still busy with the biscuits and cheese. She picked up her work, sat down by the fire, and resumed her sewing.

“Dr. Mellor, may I ask you a question?”

Her head remained bent over her work.

“A dozen if you like, now.”

“What is the trouble with Mr. Stretton?”

Mellor let a cube of cheese fall off the piece of biscuit on which it was balanced. He looked at Jessie Viner and found her calmly intent upon her sewing.

“I don’t quite understand you, Miss Viner.”

“No?”

She glanced up, smiling.

“There is something, isn’t there? I’m not asking this out of curiosity or I should expect to be snubbed.”

His eyes met hers. In fact he had been quickly considering the kindest snub he could administer, but there was something in her expression, in her attitude, in her pleasant self-possession which gave him pause. He replaced the cube of cheese on the piece of biscuit and ate it, and his silence was reflective.

“That’s rather a poser,” he said presently; “are you asking me as a doctor or a man?”

“Both.”

“Of course, you know, that as a doctor——”

“You cannot answer my question? But do you think I should have the cheek to ask you such a question unless——”

He half turned his chair from the table; his manner had become professional, defensive, but if he was strong on the point of etiquette, he was not so sure of himself.

“Unless?” he echoed.

“I had a very good reason for asking it. I have.”

He turned his chair again so that he faced her. Her attack had astonished him, but he was still more surprised by the calmly passionate way in which she pressed it. Looking at her he had the feeling that there was nothing frivolous or guileful about her challenge. He had the impression that she was very much in earnest, deeply concerned, moved to attack all reticences and to put them aside.

“My dear Miss Viner,” he said, “you may have a very good reason, but it is quite impossible for me to discuss anything of this sort——”

Her eyes were steady and slightly smiling.

“Is it quite impossible? There is something?”

His eyebrows bristled over his blue eyes.

“Ha, young lady, you are pumping me!”

“I am. And supposing something very serious depends on it, something that even the doctor does not know.”

“And which you do?”

She nodded, and he looked nettled.

“What do you want me to tell you?”

“Why Mr. Stretton came down here to live this lonely life?”

He reached for his coffee and drank it with an air of discomfort and disapproval.

“I can’t tell you that.”

“You mean you won’t?”

“Exactly.”

She bent her head over her work.

“I think it would be better for him, for us both, if you told me.”

Mellor stood up. He liked neither inquisitive people nor spoilt children, but as he looked down at Jessie Viner’s bent head and her hands calmly

sewing he felt that she was neither a busybody nor a spoilt child.

"I should require a very good reason."

"Perhaps I can give it you," she said. "I'll see."

She rose, put her work on the table, crossed the room to the window, and lifting the edge of the curtain ever so little, looked out into the night.

"Would you mind turning down the lamp, Dr. Mellor?"

He did so. He was growing interested, curious, and then she beckoned him to the window.

"Be careful. Just hold aside the edge of the curtain and tell me what you see."

Mellor took her place. The moon was up, and he could see the strip of garden, the palings of the fence, and on the other side of the lane an old and overgrown thorn hedge black and almost leafless in the moonlight.

"Well?"

He told her what he saw.

"Nothing else?"

"No."

"Nothing against the hedge?"

"Something which looks like an old tree stump."

"Do you think it is that?"

He drew back from the window and looked at her with a very different expression on his face.

"A man?"

She nodded. "John Stretton. Every night now; sometimes for an hour or more."

His lips puckered themselves as though he were about to whistle.

"You are afraid of him?"

She assured him in a very gentle voice.

"Oh, no, I am not in the least afraid of him, but for him. Do you understand?"

She turned up the lamp, and Mellor pulled out his pipe and pouch. He went and stood by the fire and crammed tobacco into the bowl of his pipe. A vase of spills stood on the mantelpiece; he took one, lit it at the fire, and held the flame to the tobacco.

"Quite sure you are not afraid of him?" he asked.

She had gone back to her chair and her sewing.

"Quite sure, but for him. Perhaps you can guess what brings him there on a cold night like this, just to look at that window. He has never said anything to me, but I know. He has some reason for not saying anything. Of course, I could ask him, but don't you think——"

She raised her eyes to Mellor's face.

"But don't you think that it ought to come from him, and yet, that if I knew, I might help him?"

He was leaning against the mantelpiece and staring at the fire.

"You do?"

"Because—oh, well, if you know what it is, don't you think you can tell me?"

"I do know," he said.

And then he glanced at her quickly and with great kindness.

"It is nothing shameful. But if I tell you I am putting a very grave responsibility upon you."

"I accept it," she said simply.

So Mellor told her all that he knew, sitting by the fire and smoking his pipe while she went on with her sewing. He was not a man of any eloquence, hard workers usually are not, but his plain and human telling of Stretton's tale made its details more vivid to her. She could see it all as Rollin Beal had seen it, appreciate the pity of it, the fate of a brave man whose scar carried not honour but a curse. Mellor was very emphatic on the question of cowardice and courage; he quoted Rollin Beal; there had never been any suggestion of cowardice; Stretton had been brave, brave to the edge of disaster.

"After all," he said, "it requires some courage for a man to get on his feet again after a knock-down blow like that, and it takes some character to live

alone on the edge of Mascall's Wood. It seems to have been his wish, a sort of inspiration——"

"I think he was right," she said.

A smile followed a sigh.

"But how men suffer! He did not foresee——"

Mellor glanced at her.

"You! No. But then, how could he? And, after all, there was luck in it. Now you know as much as I do, and I think it explains——"

She raised her eyes to his.

"Thank you, Dr. Mellor. I shall be always very grateful to you. It explains everything."

He sat in silence for half a minute, biting hard at the stem of his pipe. He felt that there was something more to be said, something which was not easy, but he knew that he ought not to shirk it.

"Probably what worries him is not only what has happened, but the thought that he ought not to marry."

Jess went on with her sewing.

"Yes. What do you think, Dr. Mellor?"

He took some time to answer her.

"Miss Viner," he said, "we are learning a good deal more about ourselves in these days. There is a thing we call disharmony. It simply means that a man or a woman has not got in life what he or she has a natural need of. Repression. No human outlet, no chance of being yourself, or, rather, better than yourself, no chance of spending all the fine stuff that is in you. None of us are quite sane while we are suffering from some great disharmony."

She made a movement of the head.

"So someone might take away that disharmony. You are in favour of it?"

"By the right person," he said, and his blue eyes smiled at her over the bowl of his pipe.

XXVIII

THE LURE OF THE LAMP

MELLOR was too big-hearted a man to picture John Stretton as a sentimental and unvirile thing hesitating for hours outside a lighted window. He had known what it was to be lonely and hot-blooded in his London days when a man was too poor or too young to marry. In Stretton's case the repression was self-imposed, but none the less real for that. It is the sensitive man who suffers.

Neither Mellor nor Jessie Viner knew that poor Stretton's fight had been made more difficult by a young woman out for adventure. To Mellor the solution of the affair seemed so simple that he was tempted to go up to Mascall's Wood and deal bluntly and beneficially with Stretton's dumbness. He reproached himself a little for not having pushed in earlier and made it his affair to help this other man, for as he put it to himself, "How much we miss by being too busy, or thinking ourselves too busy." But on further reflection he chose not to interfere, thinking it best to leave it to the woman, and in this he was fortunately wise.

For Stretton had gone back to work; he was making another fight of it, doggedly, and with his eyes once more on the horizon and some ultimate patch of light in the sky. Two months ago he had ordered a number of fruit trees, and when a wagon brought them up from Kingsbury station he could not let the trees die. He had to dig planting pits, plant and stake them, and the work kept him busy for days. It was visible to Jess from the window at the end of the long landing on the stairs of Romans Farm, and as she went to and fro from the old people's room she would pause there and watch him. His figure was very distant and yet she felt him more near.

Her most vivid and intimate thought of him was of a man who could work all day and then come down at night just to look at a lighted window. It seemed to kindle a little flame in her heart. She loved him more not less because of his shipwreck and his sufferings. All that Mellor had told her had deepened her compassion and given her a boldness in pitying him. She felt that Stretton would get no farther than the outside of that lighted window unless she opened the lattice.

In doing the thing she did Jessie Viner was laying no trap for him, but trying to open a window into his silence. She had considered it all with heart

and head, and when she turned out the lamp next evening and left the curtains undrawn, she knew that if he came he would see the play of the firelight, no more and no less. He would think the room empty.

Such was her lure. She placed a chair at the side of the window; the curtain screened her, yet the catch of the lattice was within reach of her hand. The firelight filled the room with varying lights and shadows, but the outer world beyond the window was a great blackness. There was much cloud in the sky, and the moon had not yet risen.

She sat and waited. She had no qualms of conscience in laying this ambush for him. She was giving him his opportunity, choosing the place and time for him as a lover might have chosen them. The seemingly unexpected may be a key in the hand of impulse. There was nothing but a little silence between them, and a few words from him would break it.

As she had imagined it might happen, so it happened. He was lured by the play of the firelight in that seemingly empty room. He saw the lighted window above, the almost darkened casements below, the window of the room where he had sat watching her at her work. It was full of her imagined presence. He had begun to love her in that room, and all its associations were sacred.

He slipped over the fence and along the grass path till he reached the window. He put his face close to the glass. He could see the fire burning, the dim outlines of the furniture, something which looked very like her workbasket on the table. He was lost in the realization of his love for her, its yearning, its depth, its seeming hopelessness. He did not see a hand steal out towards the catch of the lattice, for his gaze went beyond it into the mystical distances of the lights and shadows.

When the lattice opened he was so astonished, so self-betrayed, that he remained quite still.

“Who’s that?”

She stood there, leaning slightly out into the night.

“You!” she said. And then, “I thought it was a tramp or a gipsy. I was sitting here, thinking, and I saw a face.”

He managed to speak.

“I’m sorry. I’d heard your father and mother were ill. The boy told me.”

She felt that he was trying to smuggle in some explanation of his coming to the window.

“Oh, they are better, but still upstairs. I expect you thought—I mean, you did not want to disturb anybody——”

“Yes.”

He remained inarticulate. Presently he said, “I am glad they are better.”

Gently she tightened her hold on the situation.

“Come in. Dr. Mellor will be here any minute.”

He was still so confused and so eager to give some sort of natural complexion to the affair that he could not refuse her.

“I shall be in the way?”

“You ought not to be such a stranger,” she said, “that I can’t leave you alone for five minutes with your pipe. Go round to the front door. I’ll unbolt it.”

He went, and she closed the lattice. She found him standing in the porch holding his hat in his hands and looking dejected and rigid. She smiled at him, a smile that was like the touch of a hand.

“Come in.”

She had him seated by the fire, and she did not light the lamp, for those fitful and subdued flames were more in sympathy with her conspiring thoughts. He had got to tell her all that Mellor had told her. She could create the atmosphere for such a telling, win him towards it and make the confession mysteriously easy, but her love had its pride and its respect for his silence, and the initiative lay with him.

“Have you finished the new buildings yet?”

No, he had not finished them. He sat on the edge of his chair and stared at the fire.

“We thought that you must be so busy on them that you had forgotten us.”

He had a man’s opening here, and he shirked it. He felt in his pocket for his pipe.

“Yes, do smoke,” she said.

He sat, filling his pipe, and she rose and took a spill from the vase and lit it at the fire. She held it out to him, and in taking it his fingers touched hers.

“I’m glad you smoke.”

He gave her a quick, restive glance.

“Yes, it soothes the beast.”

“Does it need soothing?”

“Oh, sometimes.”

There came a knocking on the floor above, and Jess rose from her footstool.

“They want me.”

“Please go.”

She went, and he watched her from the fireside to the door, and his eyes filled with a great yearning directly her back was turned. He listened to her footsteps on the stairs and in the room above. Happy people to be nursed by her! He got up and walked softly about the room; he touched her chair, her workbasket, as though he touched her in touching them. He picked up the half-burned spill which she had held for a moment, a flake of black ash fell from it upon the hearthstone.

“If only I could,” he thought.

He fancied that he heard her returning, and he hid the twist of paper in his pocket. No; she was still up there; he heard the sound of voices.

He sat down and stared at the fire.

“I can’t,” he thought; “it isn’t fair to her. What would she think?”

He suffered. He felt, somehow, that he was in a false position, that he was a bungling and a disastrous fool even to have come to the window. Did she suspect? Did she know that he came, night after night, to look at that window? He fell into one of those absurd and self-accusing panics to which sensitive men are liable. He got up with the idea of going before she returned. Then he thought that he heard her on the stairs and saw himself caught in an act of cowardice. He sat down.

“One has only to be natural,” he reflected.

She was coming down, leaving her mother sitting up and knitting, and her father with his spectacles on his nose and a book under his chin.

“Who’s that downstairs,” Mrs. Mary had asked, “the doctor?”

“No, Mr. Stretton. He came to inquire for you.”

“Oh, Mr. Stretton.”

“Make him stay to supper,” her father had said.

When she returned she found Stretton sitting well back in his chair with his feet on the fender. She was struck by his appearance of ease, of relaxation, and yet she detected something wilful in it, an attitude painfully assumed. He looked up at her with an assumption of casual candour.

“Well, how are they?”

“Quite happy.”

“That’s good. It’s a beastly thing, ‘flu.”

She resumed her place on the footstool, her hands clasped about her knees. She had an immediate feeling that he was slipping away from her, that the real man had fled out of the house in a panic, leaving behind a conventional shell. His awkwardness had disappeared, but she would have felt happier with it than with this stultifying composure.

His cult of the “natural” led him to talk to her about the things which were supposed to interest him, fruit-growing and bee farming, and she accepted the situation. She realized that his self-control and his reticence were stronger than she had thought. He was not the sort of man who dissolved easily into a stew of self-pity, and she liked him the better for it. Meanwhile she had to suffer his hiding behind beehives and fruit punnets, and eluding her round pyramids and standards. He described to her a pamphlet he had been reading on the curing of English-grown tobacco.

“It’s the Revenue people who make it impossible,” he asserted; “if there is one thing I hate it is the official mind.”

She agreed, but she thought it was better than the contemporary State-school mind and the modern cheap-jack attitude towards life.

And all the while she was thinking: “He will never tell me. But he must tell me some day and somehow. It must come from him, not from me.”

When Mellor arrived, tired yet indulgent, he found Stretton knocking out his pipe and preparing to walk back to Mascall’s Wood. He met the doctor with the impartial friendliness of a man who had nothing at the back of his mind.

“I am afraid you are being overworked, doctor.”

“My dear sir, my job can’t be compressed into the trade union can.”

Stretton laughed.

“It is only the fool’s work or the machine work that can be treated in that way. I hope I shan’t add to your labours.”

“I hope not. That cottage of yours is too far off.”

“True. I just walked down to ask after Mr. and Mrs. Viner. I must be getting back or my dog will be howling the house down.”

He smiled at Jess, a quick, errant smile, and picked up his hat.

“Good night, Miss Viner.”

“Good night.”

Mellor nodded at Stretton, a “don’t mind me” sort of nod, and went with most human discretion to warm his hands at the fire. His big back seemed to fill the fireplace, and behind it he had hopes that this romance was moving with happy inevitableness towards good nights spoken at half-darkened doorways. But it was not. He heard Stretton’s voice, cheerful and casual.

“Please don’t bother, Miss Viner; I’ll let myself out.”

She returned from the hall, and for a moment she avoided Mellor’s eyes. Then she looked up at him.

“How hard some men are on themselves.”

“Only the best men,” he said.

XXIX

SNOW

THREE days later snow came to Burnt Heath. It began to fall in the night, silently and secretly, with no wind to drive it against the windows, and in the morning the whole world was white. It lay on the hedges and ribbing the boughs of the apple trees, and all the hillsides were a-dazzle with it as the sun rose. For the clouds which had spread it were passing, hull down, like great galleons sailing into the west. Blue sky came out of the north, a clear, still, windless sky with the silence of the snow below it. Robins twittered and came boldly to the doors and windows. In the byres and yards the beasts sent up a white steam. Every roof and stack was white, and even the gates had a capping of snow.

About nine o'clock that highly intelligent youth Sam Rugglesworth opened the back door of Romans Farm and appeared in the kitchen carrying a jug. He had failed to kick the snow off his boots, and cakes of it came off on the red-tiled floor.

" 'E don't want it this morning—Stretton, I mean."

Jess had cleared the breakfast things away and was making pastry, her flour-dusted forearms deep in a brown basin. The sleeves of her pink linen blouse were turned up above her elbows. She looked at Sam, at the snow on the floor, and at the jug which he set down on the table. The jug was full.

"You have forgotten two things, to brush your boots and to shut the door."

"It's more than likely," said the lad.

"Mr. Stretton does not want his milk?"

" 'E's in bed. 'E looked a bit silly."

"You mean he is ill?"

"I guess so."

"And you have brought the milk back!"

"Well, 'e was in bed, 'e didn't seem to 'ave no use for it."

"You idiot!" she said, and then growing rather pink for no reason that Sam could see, she told him to go home and fetch his mother.

Mrs. Rugglesworth was always glad of an excuse to come up to the farm, seeing that usually she brought away more than she took to it. She was typical of her class; she chattered, she flattered, she pilfered if she had an opportunity, she was a sycophant, and wholesomely afraid of Mrs. Mary. She was full of valiant boastings behind the backs of the Viner women: "I says to her, I says, I ain't going to be put upon. We are all ladies these days, I says." But in Romans Farm she was always servile and unctuous, just for what she could get out of it, and she always got less than she wanted.

Mrs. Rugglesworth found Jess cloaked but bare-headed, and ready to take to the snow with a basket and a jug.

"Look after the house for an hour, please, Mrs. Rugglesworth, I have to go out."

"Lor', miss, in the snow! Shall I be going on with the cooking for you?"

She bustled about, putting on the clean apron she had brought with her. In Mrs. Rugglesworth's mind a white apron and plenty of soft soap covered every deficiency and eased every problem.

"There is a joint to cook. You can leave the pastry. I shall be back in an hour."

Jess went out, and a moment later Mrs. Rugglesworth made an expedition up to the stairs to the landing window which overlooked the heath.

"She's going up to Mascall's! To play the ministerin' angel! Well, I wouldn't let a girl of mine."

With characteristic niceness she went and knocked at the Viners' bedroom door.

"Can I get you anything, ma'm? Miss Jess has gone up to Mr. Stretton's."

Mrs. Mary's voice answered her:

"I couldn't go myself, so I asked Miss Jess to go. Look after the kitchen, please, Mrs. Rugglesworth."

Mrs. Rugglesworth went, conscious, as usual, of a nasty feeling of inferiority.

Jess found the snow crisp and frozen under a clear blue sky; the furze bushes, the thorns and the old yews crusted with whiteness, nor was there any break in the white sheet until the red trunks and the dark tops of the

Scotch firs and the spruces caught the sunlight. She followed the lad's footprints, her breath making a little silver cloud in the keen air. What more could youth and love desire on such a winter morning? Never for a moment did her impulse look back. It was as though God had given it to her and she knew that it was good.

Sam Rugglesworth's footprints led up to the blue gate in the snow-covered hedge. She noticed that there was no smoke coming from the chimney. At the door she set down her jug and basket, her face faintly flushed with the inward glow of her thoughts and of her hastening over the snow. The door was unlocked, and as Jess opened it she felt that it was more than the door of the cottage, rather the gate of a man's reserve.

"John?"

There was an interval of silence, and then a voice answered from the sitting-room.

"Who's that?"

"Jess," she said. "Sam says you are ill."

"Yes. I don't know what it is."

"I'm coming in," she warned him.

She waited a few seconds for that challenge of hers to be taken up, but when he remained silent she became the woman in possession. He had rigged up his camp bed in the sitting-room with the idea of being nearer to his supplies and to the kitchen fire, but he had felt too ill to leave his bed that morning. Picking up her basket and jug, Jess made her way into the kitchen. She could see the foot of Stretton's camp bed, with Paul curled up on the foot of it.

Jess was conscious of a moment's hesitation, as though her heart had dropped a beat.

"May I come in, John?"

"Yes," he said, "come in, if you will."

His voice suggested helplessness, a kind of wondering resignation. He was lying with the clothes pulled up to his chin, and he was shivering, and he had a patch of redness on either cheek. The raw cold of the room struck her, and she noticed half a glass of milk and a plate of dry biscuits on the chair beside the bed. His eyes looked at her without a question, without a protest, helplessly yet attentively, like the eyes of a very young child.

“Why, you have no fire!”

He moved his head on the pillow.

“I felt—too——”

“Thank God I came,” she said. “You ought to have sent us word.”

She threw off her cloak and got to work. And he lay there, looking at her with eyes of wonder yet of acceptance. She laid a hand on his forehead, felt his pulse, and taking the little silvered case of a thermometer from her pocket, she slipped the glass bulb under his tongue. Paul, suddenly interested, descended from the bed and followed her into the kitchen, and realizing that the dog was hungry she found him a bone. The kitchen fire needed lighting, and she began to look about her for coal and wood. A digression into the sitting-room and a glance at the thermometer brought her intent and ministering eyes back to Stretton’s face.

“I thought so,” she said.

He smiled vaguely.

“I’ve got a temperature?”

“I should think you have!”

He accepted her verdict, and when she began to move about the room his eyes followed her with a fascinated brightness. The inward struggle had ceased in him, he surrendered himself into her hands.

“Jess, my head aches.”

She was back at once and bending over him with a strange glamour upon her face. The man in him had called to her; he had uttered his first cry of human acceptance and appeal, and the woman in her was thrilled.

“Does it, John? We’ll see to that.”

She had brought some aspirin tablets with her, and she gave him two with some milk to drink, supporting his head and holding the glass for him.

“Now keep warm. Leave everything to me.”

She arranged the bedclothes and turned to other labours. There were two fires to be laid and lit and coal to be brought in from one of the outhouses, and Stretton could watch her as she knelt in front of the grate, the winter sunlight shining in upon her russet head, her pink blouse, white throat and forearms. His aching, feverish head was full of this beneficent impression of her, and his mood was one of feeling and not of thought. He was conscious

of her as a dear, rescuing presence, something vaguely wonderful which had no need to crystallize into words.

Jess went to wash her hands and to warm up some milk, and she brought it him in a cup. He looked at it before drinking, with a sort of dreamy astonishment as though this bit of white china was as amazing as her presence.

"That's good."

When he had drunk a little she placed the cup on the chair beside the bed.

"Don't stay near me," he said, "you'll catch it."

"I ought to have caught it long ago if I were going to. Now you will be all right for a while. I must run down to the farm and send for Dr. Mellor. I shall be back or I will send someone up before the fires need seeing to."

"You are coming back?" he asked.

"Of course."

"I am giving you a lot of trouble."

"I have not noticed it yet."

She smiled, nodded at him, and turned to go.

"Jess?"

"Yes, dear."

"May I have the blind down?"

She lowered it and came back to the bed as though she had forgotten something.

"Don't worry about anything. Do you want me to send a message to anyone?"

"No," he said with an air of drowsy contentment, "no, Jess, thank you."

She was to and fro again during the morning, and going in softly found him asleep. His fire needed mending, and she knelt down and put coal on lump by lump, using her fingers so that she should make no noise. But the perfume of her presence must have penetrated into his brain, for he woke up and lay watching her. He did not move or speak, and it was not till she rose from her knees and turned to the bed that she realized that he was awake.

"John, I thought you were asleep."

He looked at her with that helpless attentiveness and the eyes of a very young child.

“I was. What time is it?”

“About half-past eleven.”

“You have been back to the farm?”

“Yes.”

“It has been snowing, hasn’t it?”

“In the night, yes.”

“You ought not to have come up again. You ought to have sent a woman, or someone.”

“I sent myself. There is no one else fit to send.”

She laughed.

“A nurse should be self-confident. Now what about a little more milk?”

“Just what you think right, Jess.”

She smiled at him with indulgent tenderness.

“You are going to be a good patient. Now go to sleep again.”

He closed his eyes as though he found it easy to obey.

After that Jess went out into the sunlight and the snow. She took Paul with her, Paul who had never before seen such strange white stuff, and between them they went mad together, for Jess was very happy. They romped together down towards Romans Farm, Jess making balls of snow and throwing them at Paul, while the dog raced round and round, sending up a flurry of snow. For a great happiness finds its first expression in the joy of movement; the deeper inward glow follows after, and the limbs relax and the eyes fill with thought. Jess had come to this other mood before they reached the farm, and the dog grew sober in sympathy. “How vile of us,” she said to him, “when he is ill up there!” But she could not regret it, nor John’s aching head, nor the sudden rift in his stoicism, nor her own secret exultation. And a sudden cautiousness took possession of her in the midst of that white landscape, even though she laughed at it and at herself. “Snow may be dangerous, doggie. Supposing I put my foot in a rabbit hole and sprained my ankle! What a disaster!”

It did not happen, and she went in and up to her people's room where Thomas Viner and Mary Viner did not look at her too closely, but felt the stir and the quick breathing life that were in her. She stood by the window in the full winter sunlight looking out over the white hills.

"Is there anything I can do for you dear people?"

Her voice had a rich gentleness. And what could one say to a young woman whose voice came down out of heaven?

"I think I'll get up after tea," said her mother; "you'll want help. I have been letting myself be lazy."

"I'll be here to help you."

"Nonsense. That tonic of Mellor's has made me feel like a young woman. And I want to keep my eyes on Sally Rugglesworth. She's a cheap creature."

Thomas Viner was pretending to read his book.

"The doctor ought to be here soon," he observed; "it seems to me that if we could get Mr. Stretton moved——"

"Just so," said his wife; "but it might be dangerous."

They knew that youth has its perils, anyway, but that youth has the heart to meet them.

Mellor arrived late in the afternoon. He left his car in the lane and walked straight up over the heath after a few words with the Viners, and he went alone. But Jess had told him that she would be following him, and Mellor had glanced at her with an air of understanding. He had been struck by her serenity and by a kind of determined and active happiness which was in possession of some great thing and had no thought of surrendering it. Her self-consciousness was full and complete and without doubts and disharmonies. She was alone with her one vivid inspiration, and she would walk past other people as though they had no existence for her. Life was hers, and she was right.

Mellor found Stretton awake and flushed with high fever.

"It's a shame to drag you all the way up here, doctor."

"It's nothing of the kind; it's my job. Now, my friend, let us have a look at you."

He went very carefully over Stretton, and at the end of his examination he pulled a chair up beside the fire. It needed more coal, and he picked up the tongs and extracted several lumps from the coal-box. Stretton lay and watched him.

"It's 'flu, I suppose, doctor?"

"It is. You will have to have a nurse, my lad. The Viners suggested having you taken down to the farm, but I don't think it is quite safe."

"But I don't want a nurse," said Stretton.

"My dear chap, it is not a question of what you want; it is a matter of necessity. I may have to keep you in bed for a week."

"Couldn't the boy look after me?"

"That living proof of the silly theory of equality! I don't think so. You must have a nurse."

"I don't want a nurse."

"I must see if I can find one. Perhaps——"

"Doctor, I'd rather——"

"Be quiet, my dear chap. Hallo, here's Miss Viner; she may be able to suggest something."

He met Jess at the door and made a sign to her to turn into the kitchen. He closed the door and pretended to warm his hands at the fire.

"It's influenza. He must have a nurse, or at least someone to look in frequently."

"Of course," she said.

"He refuses to have a nurse, but I told him that he will have to have one. I suggest——"

He turned and looked at her. His eyes were kind and full of shrewdness. "It seems to me," they said, "that this rests between you and him. In a sense it is your right, and I recognize it. Will you take it on?"

She looked out of the window, smiling faintly.

"I'm quite capable. I had some training during the war. I could come to and fro."

"So far as I am concerned that settles it," he said. "But I am thinking ____"

She turned to him.

“Dr. Mellor, I think this chance was sent to me, to us both. God knows I’m not gloating over his helplessness, but I do thank God for it. It is more than nursing that he needs.”

“I like your honesty,” he said, “and your courage. That man is lucky.”

There was a short silence between them. Then he asked her a question.

“Shall I tell him, or will you?”

“I will,” she said, going towards the door with something sacrificial in her eyes.

XXX

PERSUASION

So John Stretton ceased to fight and yet he had not surrendered. A man who is ill accepts all that happens in the immediate world about him as an infant accepts his food. He is a little insensitive, a little drowsy, more of a body and less of a soul. And he is in a mood to have some soft presence near him, especially if his life has been lonely and the cry of his heart has been for comradeship and sympathy.

Somehow it seemed so supremely natural. At least Jess made it seem natural. She just came into the room and did things, without explaining why she did them, or why there was no one else to do them, and in a day the whole of him accepted her and made no quarrel of it. It was as though the subconscious part of him was dominant, and knowing by instinct what was good and pleasant and natural, stretched itself in the sunlight and asked no questions. While the fever was on him he asked no questions, either of himself or of her. He lay in the lap of life and looked up at her as a child looks at its mother. He was conscious sometimes of great wonder, and always of gratitude, but the immediate future was vague and misty. He did not want to worry about anything, but just to be there and feel that he had some reason for being extraordinarily happy.

These footsteps in the snow linked up the cottage and Romans Farm, making a chain across the whiteness of the heath. Jess followed that path several times each day, though young Rugglesworth went up early each morning and tackled some of the rougher work. It was Jess who kept the fires alight, who fed him, and lit the lamp at dusk, and made up the fire for the night, and no one questioned the inevitableness of what she did. There was one moment in the sitting-room at Romans Farm when old Viner and his wife looked at each other across the table with eyes which sought faith and understanding. Old Viner had been up to Mascall's and had seen Stretton, a Stretton who was beginning to think.

"I suppose she's up there," said Jess's father.

"She'll be back any minute. I'm not worrying, Tom."

Thomas Viner stirred his tea.

“She’s a good girl. Besides, the lad had a talk with me. He’s straight. He has been straighter than either you or I guessed.”

Mrs. Viner looked at her husband’s face as she might have looked at the face of a solid and reliable clock. He had ticked out the years faithfully, and she had complete confidence in his sense of rhythm.

“Provided there is no gossip, Tom.”

“Gossip!” said he. “If Adam and Eve had listened to gossip where would you and I be, old girl?”

And then Jess came in with a little powdering of snow in her hair, and a shine in her eyes that made her parents look at their plates.

“He’s normal,” she said, and sat down with her back to the fire.

“That’s good. Seems it is snowing again,” her father observed with a glance at her hair.

“Yes. Poor Dr. Mellor! ‘Damn the snow,’ he said, ‘how am I to get round!’ He is busier than ever. People wait for him and waylay him in the lanes. He was going back to see Colonel Copredy.”

“So they have got it at Ottways?”

“Yes.”

While Jess drank her tea Mellor was walking up the drive to Ottways and wishing the red house in some other county. There were houses which he disliked entering, and Ottways was one of them, for it was querulous and exacting whenever sickness entered it. Mellor was pulling off his gloves in the hall when Isobel Copredy came down the stairs with an illtempered look on her face.

“We have been expecting you all day, doctor.”

It was a reproof and Mellor was in no mood to be reproved by a young woman who was less than half his age.

“I am very busy, Miss Copredy.”

“We saw your car pass the house quite two hours ago.”

He threw his gloves on the table and moved towards the stairs.

“Quite so. I have to see someone on Burnt Heath, and I make sure of doing that by daylight.”

She gave him a queer look and became suddenly suave and soothing.

“Of course. We are all of us exacting. One gets worried, you know. Is it our landlord who is ill?”

“Yes.”

She preceded him up the stairs, and Mellor had ceased almost to be aware of her. He had so many other things to think of.

“Influenza, I suppose?”

“Yes,” he said mechanically.

“What a nuisance for you, having an isolated patient like that.”

He was roused by this personal touch.

“Oh, it is worse for the patient. How long has Colonel Copredy been ill?”

“Since yesterday,” she said, opening the door of her father’s room, but remaining on the landing.

Mellor entered, and she closed the door after him and went slowly down the stairs. The news had piqued her and there was anger in her eyes. Many things occurred to her, thoughts prompted by malice, curiosity, the irrepressible spirit of adventure and interference that was in her. She smiled, but her smile had a sharp edge to it. “Who is looking after him?” she thought. “Is there anyone looking after him?” A suggestive possibility occurred to her, and she frowned. She visualized a situation, a rather provoking and complex situation. She was intrigued by it. She saw the same human chances in the picture which Jessie Viner had seen, but she saw them with different eyes.

“I’ll go up there—to-morrow,” she decided.

Such was the danger when Stretton began to think. The soul of him was no longer half asleep in a sick body, and he came back to the waking world of doubt and of desire. Yet it was a different world, for Jess had made it different, and in realizing its newness he had moments of generous panic. Why had she come to him like this, and what did her coming mean to her and to himself? What would other people think of it? What did Thomas and Mary Viner think of it?

For he could not be sure that she cared, for the more deeply a man loves the less selfishly is he absorbed in the assurance of his own vanity. Had she done this out of kindness, out of sheer goodness of heart? Had he been a cynic or less involved in the passionate solution of the problem he would

have found little difficulty in discovering an answer. But what he did know was that he wanted her more than ever, not only for her gracious and shapely youth, for her arms, and lips, and throat and eyes, but for the dear spirit of her, her courage, her cleverness, her wholesome common sense. She was the very heart of the green world. And so he lay there, thinking and thinking, while the inevitable decision formed in his mind.

Supposing he had allowed her to compromise herself?

The thought frightened him, but his fear was generous and chivalrous, the gesture of a man who rushes to arms in passionate defence.

He became dominated by this fear.

He realized that he would have to tell her, and tell her everything, and he was astonished to find that he was much less afraid of telling her than he had been ten days ago. What had seemed impossible then had become inevitable now. He still feared it not a little, but not with the same kind of fear.

Beal's words kept recurring to him.

"The woman to whom you can tell anything is the woman who will understand, because she loves."

Was it true? He lay and looked out of the window, and it seemed to him that the sky had broadened, that the winter was passing and that the spring was near. He had moments of exultation, wonder, and happy incredulity.

"If she was not repelled by my sick body," he thought, "would that other thing repel her?"

It never occurred to him to suspect that she knew.

But chiefly he feared that sinisterly innocent affair with Isobel Copredy. Would Jess understand it? Would she take his word against that of another woman? Sex is such a thing of suspicions and of passionate prejudices, of intimate tendernesses and disgusts. Would she understand that he had been tortured, tempted, and yet won such a victory as few men win? If she could not understand that then the issue would be hopeless.

But he had got to tell her.

He knew now that it was inevitable.

What he did not know was that Jess herself had made it deliberately inevitable, that she had planted the seed and had watched the plant's growth.

She had more than a feeling that Stretton's reserve was wearing very thin, that he was on the edge of the great surrender. He looked at her differently, and without realizing that as his attitude of mind to her had changed, his face had changed with it. He had ceased to be reserved and difficult. Before he had seemed always in the shadow; now he was in the sunlight.

But down at Ottways on that winter afternoon Isobel Copredy was pinning on a green hat that cocked itself audaciously on her red head like the hat of a bravo. There were moments when she suggested some young "ruffler" in a cloak and mask out for sword and dagger work. Old Copredy was ill, rather desperately ill, breathing fast and hard, with pinched nose and blue cheek bones, and when his daughter drifted in and stood beside his bed he could not tell her that he was afraid of dying. He was a lonely old devil, so lonely that he welcomed the coming of a trained nurse whom Mellor had wired for from London.

"I am going out for some fresh air."

"Yes, it will do you good. I think I'm a little better."

She saw nothing pathetic in his poor lean old head and straining eyes, the head of an old man panting in his race from death, the pursuer. She went down the stairs and out into the avenue where the snow had turned into mud and slush. She was interested in another man, a young man whom she meant to worry and provoke and torture until he fell to playing with her as she pleased.

She left Ottways about half-past three, for it was in her mind to break in upon Stretton about dusk, and if she found him alone to take possession of the cottage as she had done on that day of rain and sunlight in June. She would lock the door, make tea, and amuse herself with pretending to be a pardoning angel. From Ottways to Mascall's Wood was an hour's walk, and about the time that Isobel left Ottways, Jessie Viner was crossing the heath on her way to Stretton's cottage.

There may have been something significant in the fact that Stretton had got up and shaved himself, but he was back in bed when Jess entered the cottage. Getting up, even for half an hour, had tired him, but if the body of him was tired the other part of him was not. She was struck by the change in him. She was aware of his eyes fixed on her with a wide and steady brightness. They made her think of open windows.

"Ready for your tea?"

“Yes, I’m beginning to be hungry. Will you have tea with me, Jess?”

“Of course. I’ll go and get it ready. What about some buttered toast?”

“If you will be responsible to Mellor!”

“But that’s moral cowardice!”

His face seemed to grow intensely pale, but with the pallor of white light.

“No, I’m not a moral coward.”

“I never meant that,” she said quickly, making a movement towards the kitchen.

He called after her, and she knew by his voice that the moment had come.

“Jess, please leave the door open.”

“All right.”

“I want to talk to you. Can you hear me?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t stop getting the tea ready. I like to hear you moving about in there.”

She stood very still a moment, looking towards the door, and her face had the shine of love upon it. Then she turned to the fire, threw some dry wood on it, and put the kettle on to boil.

“Jess,” said his voice.

“Yes, John.”

“May I tell you something? I mean, I must tell you.”

“You may tell me anything.”

“It is why I came here. I have been wanting to tell you for months, but I couldn’t. And there are other things.”

She took down the tray and began to collect the tea-things.

“I want you to tell me, John. I have been wanting you to tell me.”

“You have?”

“Yes.”

“Then you guessed there was——”

“Tell me,” she answered.

She began to cut the bread for making toast, but she saw that there was not enough fire for it, yet she set herself to the pretence of making it, for what did such a trifle matter! His voice was in her ears, urgent and deep and inspired. She could picture him sitting up in bed, leaning forward a little, his face set towards this act of courage, his eyes bright and anxious. His words did not come easily, for a lover’s words are like drops of blood pressed out of the heart of desire. She felt the sincerity in him, the straining, passionate sincerity. It seemed to reach out and touch her like an invisible spirit hand.

“That’s what I was,” he said, “a sort of outcast. I had to begin all over again. I had a feeling that I should get healed here, but there was one thing I did not foresee.”

She thought she knew what that thing was, but she kept her eyes on the fire.

“The loneliness of it, John?”

He hesitated for a moment.

“Yes, but more than that, someone else and you.”

She gave a quick turn of the head. The unexpected had surprised her.

“Tell me.”

His silence was the silence of struggle. She felt it and was gripped by it.

“Tell me.”

And then he told her. His words came faster now, as though he were in fierce haste to have done with it. She listened; she had gone pale, her eyes seemed to be turned inward; the bread on the fork was smoking and she did not notice it. His words kept beating and beating like the beats of a heart.

“It’s true; I swear to you it is true. I never thought that a woman could be like that. I went mad; I nearly killed her, but even then she wouldn’t leave me alone. She tried to murder my love for you. I got a gun one night and fired to frighten her, you remember the night when your father came up. I have not seen her since, but she wrote me a letter, a devil’s letter. Then I thought that I would go away, that there was nothing left for me but to go away. But I found I couldn’t, Jess, I couldn’t.”

She bowed her head. She let the blackened bread fall off the fork on to the hearthstone. There was silence. She remained quite still. Then, suddenly, she turned to the table and began to make a clatter with the tea-things. Movement and the homely wholesomeness of the noise steadied her.

Again she heard his voice. It was like the voice of a man in anguish, imprisoned underground.

"Jess, what are you thinking? Don't leave me, don't leave me—to her."

She stifled a great sob of emotion, picked up the tray and carried it into the other room.

"I'm having tea with you, John. I'll—I'll never leave you, dear."

She was aware of his white face in the dusk, a face of wonder, anguish and supreme joy.

"Jess! Oh, God bless you!"

She put down the tray. His arms were out. She knelt down and let him lean on her, his head upon her shoulder.

XXXI

TWO WOMEN

IT was Jess who heard that sound, the click of the latch of a gate, and it was followed by an interval of silence, a silence which should have been broken by another sound which never came.

"Someone's there."

She turned to the window. She was still kneeling beside the bed, and Stretton's arm lay across her shoulders, his cheek almost touching hers. He too was looking at the window, and they saw the same thing, and saw it together, a face looking in at them, the face of Isobel Copredy.

Dusk was dimming the colours and turning the world to a level greyness, but her red hair and the hard blueness of her eyes were very vivid to both of them. She showed no shame and no embarrassment. She seemed to stand there like some fleshly, vigorous, common child staring in at a shop window, greedy, insolent and unshameable.

Jess felt Stretton's arm contract about her shoulders. Her own heart was beating hard and fast.

"I'm glad," she said suddenly, but she did not tell him why she was glad.

She rose from her knees, and very deliberately she arranged his pillows and with an air of happy tenderness, an intimacy which she did not mean to be misread. She bent over him and smiled at that something in his eyes.

"Will you leave it to me?"

"Send her away," he said; "she's horrible."

"I am going to ask her in."

"Jess."

She was flushed now, shining, brilliant. She laid a supreme and triumphant hand upon his forehead.

"She shall see. She shall have me as your answer. I am a woman and so is she."

"But you don't know her."

“John, I think I do. I should know her without ever hearing her speak a word. Trust me.”

She left him. She went out. There was buoyancy in her very movement, a triumphant and implacable confidence. She opened the cottage door and stood holding it open. She smiled at the other woman who was staring at her from the path.

“Please come in, Miss Copredy. I am making tea.”

Even then she did not know what that other woman would do or say, but she was ready for everything, and all the while she smiled.

“John is much better. He has just been telling me——”

She was aware of the other’s nipped nostrils and narrowing eyes. And then the flash came.

“You know, I suppose, that——”

But something stopped her, rendered her inarticulate, a look of Jess’, quiet, calmly observant, travelling first downwards and then returning, to rest upon her face. It was a look which any woman would have understood.

“Oh, yes, I know. But it really does not matter now. I feel I ought to be rather sorry for you, Miss Copredy. You see, there are such different sorts of men. Won’t you come in?”

She could feel the vibration of the other woman’s body.

“Shut that door. I want to tell you——”

“Really, there is no need to shut the door. Every door is open between John and me. I’m asking you to come in, because it simply does not matter whether you come in——”

She smiled. She was inspired; victorious.

“John,” she called, “Miss Copredy won’t come in. Ask her to come in.”

He heard, and the blind lover in him obeyed her.

“Miss Copredy, we are going to have tea. Let Jess bring you in.”

He did not hear the other woman’s answer, nor did Jess tell him what it was, for some vile things are best buried.

But when she closed the door and came back to him she hid a wound, a little secret flow of blood, and yet the smart of it heightened her sense of his redemption. She was giving him sanctuary; she had put her own body

between him and that other woman, and she wondered whether the man in him understood.

"She's gone! Oh, my dear, even the horrible things of life can be funny."

She was overwrought, and sitting down beside his bed she broke into sudden laughter.

"What did she say to you, Jess?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing! Women need few words—when they deal with each other, but oh, my dear!"

He did understand her. Sickness subtilizes a man, and Stretton's love was an inspiration. He seemed to see all round life and into the deeps of it; he felt things as he had never felt them before; he understood her laughter, that there was pain behind it, exquisite tears, perhaps a little tender doubting of his knowledge of her as a woman. It was she who had fought and protected, but now the very love in her needed protection, comforting, and somehow—he understood.

He took one of her hands, held it very hard between the two of his, and then raised it to his lips.

"I shall never make this up to you, but I will try."

She sat with bowed head, strangely smiling.

"Something has gone out of me, John."

He remained very still, holding her hand, and looking out of the darkening window. His eyes had a steady fierceness.

"That something is in me," he said, "the most sacred thing in all the world. I have a great heart in me now, and such courage. Nothing can take it away, nothing shall ever take it away. You have killed my loneliness."

She stole a look at him, and his face was transfigured.

"I'm making love to you, Jess, and oh, my God, I can't help making love to you. I used to ask myself: 'Is it right?' "

"Make love to me, John," she said softly; "have no fear."

He turned his head and sat looking at her.

"I have no fear. It is not what is wrong or right, but what is. This is. It is the only real and great thing in the world. Do you know how much I love you, how much I want you, how wonderful I think you?"

“I’m not at all wonderful, John. I’m just—a woman.”

He raised that hand of hers again.

“Isn’t that what a man asks for? Just a woman, you, the one woman? Why, life’s all different. I know what I am and where I am, where I am going, where we are going. It’s so simple. It’s like turning on a light in a darkened room.”

They sat in silence for a while.

“John,” she said presently, “we were going to have tea.”

They kissed suddenly, and she slipped away. She lit the lamp and drew the curtains, and rescued the kettle which was boiling itself empty. She seemed to linger out yonder just for the joy of coming back.

“Jess,” he said, “I’ve been thinking.”

She drew up the table and sat down by the fire.

“Well?”

“Will you marry me?”

“I’ll marry you, John.”

“Will you wait for six months? Listen. I want to talk to Mellor and your father; they are straight men, good men. I want to prove myself; I want to be able to say to my own soul: ‘That thing is never going to happen again. It can’t happen.’ Do you understand?”

“I understand,” she said.

“That I want to have the right to love you?”

“Who can take it away from you, John?” she asked.

XXXII

SECURITY

THE winter passed and the spring came, and when John Stretton looked towards Romans Farm he saw a whiteness gathering about it, the blossom of its orchard trees. A little later the red-brown walls and roof of the old house sunk deeper and deeper into a mist of green. The growth of the year flowed round it secretly, joyously, with a mysterious stealth. Its windows looked through greenness at the soft distances of an English landscape.

Stretton's eyes were turned often to Romans Farm. He saw it in the early sunlight, at full noon, in the evening, and always it spoke to him of peace. Jessie Viner lived there, and Jessie Viner understood. She was his and yet not his, and this sense of waiting had for them both the mystery and the strangeness of the spring. Her presence there spoke to him of growth and hope, sunshine and soft rains, the singing of birds in the woodlands, the sense of summer waiting for to-morrow.

Security, a most sweet feeling of security, that was what John Stretton discovered as the days grew longer. It was as though this country girl, so human and so wholesome, gave him that which he had lacked, self-completeness, self-expression, spiritual repose. He had a feeling that nothing evil could happen to him, that the understanding of the love made him invulnerable. To him she was so vivid, so convincing, so complete that she became a figure of healing, a proof of the essential goodness of things.

He worked.

Never had work seemed so good or so full of meaning. The zest of life had come back to him, the human wholesomeness of doing things and doing them with his own hands, not for himself, but for her. He had a comrade, a partner. The insurgent, restless "I" had become "we." He saw life growing and growing, and he understood that this growth could be natural and yet most shrewdly managed. It was a partnership, and in a partnership there are two voices, two hearts, two minds, and one purpose. He realized that he did not want her to be just like himself, but something delightfully different and yet his. Much suffering had driven the exacting, arrogant youth out of him. If she was to be his, he was to be hers. Their hands were never to fall apart, even when they differed. For differ they would.

It was she who insisted on that, and he found something infinitely fresh and wholesome in her common sense.

"Even when I contradict you, John, remember I'll be loving you while I do it."

"I shall not forget it," he said; "but the trouble will be that I shall feel that you are right."

"Oh, no, you won't," she answered. "I should hate you if you were like that. I want a man. You want a woman. Contrasts make life interesting."

They were very honest with each other. Their love was an out-of-door love which did not sit about on sofas, suffering provocation, the sniggering, giggling prurience of the vulgar. In many ways they were very modern; they discussed things with the idea of being fair to each other and of avoiding illusions and misunderstandings. They found that they differed about children. Stretton did not like children; he was quite frank about it, and being a sensitive man he had very good reasons for disliking them.

"But you would like your own, mine?" she suggested.

He agreed that that was probable.

"Of course," she told him, "one's own children are the only children that one does like. That's the real truth, but society is not honest enough to allow it. Children are a lot of trouble; they are not beautiful unless they are well washed and well loved and well smacked—when necessary. I know quite well why you don't like children."

"Why?" he asked her.

"Because most of them come out of ugly, stupid homes, and because all that is bad in the home seems exaggerated in the child. You hate all that is cheap and ugly and loud and savage, and most children are that. But if we have children I shall take good care that ours are not. It is up to me."

"Yours couldn't be," he said gently.

"Nor yours, John. But aren't we being rather bumptious?"

"No," he insisted, "we are looking at things squarely, honestly. When things go wrong nowadays people put it down to the system, or to capitalism, or to Bolshevism, anything but the real cause. It's because the world is so full of rotten, cheap materialism. Even the children get it. How can you expect them not to get it? It's what is inside us that matters. And it is so simple."

“Yes, but it does not make any show, dear man. It doesn’t give you silk stockings, and motor-cars, and all that.”

And they laughed.

But most of their talk was of the life they would lead and the home they would live in. It was to be the cottage, even if the coming years saw it as a transfigured cottage; they were agreed upon that.

“And if you get bored?” she said.

“I shall never get bored.”

“Be careful.”

“Jess,” he said very seriously, “I don’t think I shall. I’m too full of plans; I don’t see the end of them. But what about you?”

She smiled at invisible distances.

“I’m very strong. I’m most wickedly healthy. I don’t think I have ever been bored or that I ever shall be. It’s as though my body insisted on being happy, yet without thinking about it, because it finds things so good. It’s nothing to boast about. I got it when I was born.”

He drew her to him and kissed her.

“You wholesome, happy thing,” he said; “I love you.”

They were full of plans for the future, and being happy people they had no schemes for reforming the world; they were content with their own affairs and so were not sociological busybodies. They were going to grow fruit, run a bee farm, and experiment with English-grown tobacco. They had a plan for taking over Romans Farm or working it in conjunction with Thomas Viner, and Old Viner smiled at them and thought it might be managed. He was growing old, but not so old that he was deaf to new ideas.

Stretton had many talks with Thomas Viner, for in old Viner there was much of Jess. The daughter seemed to have inherited his warm heart and her supreme common sense from him. He had the faith of a mystic, but no illusions. He was the kindest of men, but like most workers who have had other workers under them, he was out of love with sloppy humanitarianism.

“Never be soft with your men,” was one of his sayings; “you can’t afford to trifle with ignorant people.”

When Stretton wondered whether there was any reason for any man being ignorant, old Viner gave him one of his shrewd looks.

“It is the nature of the beast. Take men and study them. I’ve had to. Three will work hard, because it’s in them; another three will do just as little as they damned well can; the other three will be bad or good, and it depends on whether they get with the bad three or the good three. It’s a fact.”

“But the socialists would say——”

“Socialism!” said old Viner with a kind of smiling scorn. “That’s all paper stuff. I go by human nature.”

One day in April a part of Stow House appeared upon the heath, Car and his mother, both a little curious as to John’s romance and viewing it from different angles. Stretton had met them at Kingsbury station, and when in the car with him his mother wept a little. Carlyon was in the seat beside the driver.

“I do hope you will be happy, dear.”

“It is going to make all the difference in the world to me,” he told her.

Her good nature saved her from being selfish, that and her passion for making a mystery of things. John’s future wife was a mystery, a sentimental mystery, and Lavinia Stretton was dying to explore her.

“I am sure Miss Viner is a lucky woman.”

“Wait till you see her,” he said.

His calmness impressed Lavinia. It had the serenity of a supreme faith; it neither broke into raptures nor betrayed a shy complacency. He said that he was happy, and his mother felt that he was happy.

“We have had such trouble,” she confessed.

“Where? How?”

“With your father.”

“About this?”

She nodded mysteriously.

“He would not play golf for a week. Men are ridiculous.”

“But why?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said; “only that men do take things so strangely.”

She smiled. Sentimentalist that she was yet she had discovered, what most women discover, the absurd, incalculable, exasperating, lovable boy in

man. He sulked, and he grew excited, he became rhetorical over the grocer's bill and solaced his penitence with some other piece of generosity. He saved odds and ends of string and sealing-wax, scolded because an electric light was left burning all night, and then bought his wife a new fur coat.

"I'm sorry," said the son.

"Oh, it's nothing," she said; "he won two golf balls last Saturday. He sent you his love."

"Dear old pater," said John.

But he heard more of the affair from Car, and it appeared that Bartholomew Stretton's "old man" mood had been attacked and dispersed by the most unexpected of persons, Madge their sister.

Car laughed over it.

"Madge may have no mystery. She just shouts 'fore' and drives into you if you are a foozler and holding up the game. She drove slap into the gov'nor. 'Who's getting married, pater, you or John?' 'Well, if he likes her, it's all right, isn't it? It's his business.' 'Farmer's daughter! Well, if John is going to live a farmer's life, isn't that about the most sensible thing he could do? Now if he had wanted to marry a dying duck with fifty pairs of shoes and no shove in her, you might have groused! Besides, wasn't one of our grandmothers a farmer's daughter?' "

Car twinkled.

"Madge is like a fire engine. She pumps cold water on you, but, after all, it is clean water."

The pilgrimage was a success. Jess came to lunch at the cottage; in fact she had helped to prepare the lunch, and the whole party went down to Romans Farm for tea. Lavinia fell to Jess in the first quarter of an hour, sensing in the girl who was to be John's wife a happy yet wise warm-heartedness which is the most precious of dowries. She thought Jess a little old-fashioned, which was the highest praise she could bestow. Romans delighted her. She went about calling everything "sweet," and declaring that it had always been her dream to live in the country. With Mary Viner she did not walk so smoothly, but they treated each other with careful politeness. Thomas Viner she accepted with ease and pleasure. "Such a fine head," as she told John, "so rugged, you know, and wise. One of Nature's gentlemen."

Car, the connoisseur, was amused. Jess was not his particular type; he liked something a little higher in the heel, "more of a powder-puff," as he

would have expressed it, but he realized the woman in her. “She’s rich and pleasant, a good fire to warm the hands of life at. John’s no fool, though I don’t believe he knows a brass bean about women.”

They returned to Esher, leaving an atmosphere of indulgent approval behind them, and able to reassure old Bartholomew as to John’s sanity.

“Just the woman for him,” said Car.

Bartholomew had a very great respect for Car’s opinion.

“Reginald has been down here. He’s rather upset about it.”

“Doesn’t approve! Well, if you were to ask Reginald’s wife what her views of marriage are, marriage with Reginald——”

“That’s their affair,” said his father.

“Anyhow, I don’t want to listen to the opinions of a bald-headed prig who couldn’t help making any decent or indecent woman miserable. I should like to shut Reg up with a negress——”

“Car!” said his father, shocked, “your brother!”

“My brother,” said Carlyon, “with a hard-boiled egg for a head.”

So the spring days went by, and the six months of John Stretton’s self-imposed trial were falling rapidly like the last grains of sand in an hour-glass. The life of six months ago had a sense of distance; all the old disharmonies, the doubts, the horror of loneliness seemed more and more things of the past, memories that were growing dim, so dim that they appeared unreal. His feeling of security was complete. He wrote to Rollin Beal, and Beal’s letter was a healer’s blessing.

“You say that it has happened as I said it would happen. My dear man, there is no vanity in my pleasure. When one loves one’s work very dearly it is above vanity. There is something of awe, something of sacred pride in it. In our puppy stage we are tempted to yap, and I hope the wise smile at us indulgently. Bring her to see me some day. I suppose such a woman is the best proof of the fact that ideals do matter, and that they matter supremely.”

Stretton began to feel that the sky was clear, that he was healed, that the leak in his brain was closed. He became more and more convinced that never again would he be swept by one of those savage storms. As the occultists would have put it: “His ‘elemental’ was chained. It no longer had any power to possess him.” Jess had cast out his devil.

Meanwhile his life became more and more intricately woven into the life of Romans Farm. He spent quite half his time there, and he sat with them at the table in the pleasant, shabby dining-room. He was one of them; he began to know almost every corner of the old house, the cool, dim dairy with its brown pans, the cellar which smelt of herbs and pastry and ale, the attics where apples were stored, the kitchen full of brass, copper and old oak. He was learning to milk, to look after the beasts, to manage a team of horses, how to sharpen the knives of a reaper, the hundred and one things that a man can learn on a farm. He saw the grass growing deep and full of shadows, the leaves spreading and turning the orchards into canopies of green. Jess taught him all that she knew about bees and fruit. In the spring evenings they would wander about the farm, over the heath, or in Stretton's wood, making plans, lovers who loved all things that grew. When dusk came they would return and light the lamp, and put their plans on paper. They delighted in making lists of things, trees, furniture, linen, books.

They were very happy months, and at the end of June Jessie Viner and John Stretton were to be married.

XXXIII

THE IRRESPONSIBLE MALE

YET there was one danger which John Stretton did not foresee, nor could he have been wise as to the event until the disastrous thing had happened.

Love can make a man vulnerable, even when he thinks himself most secure. Death may walk in at the door and dreams fly out of the window. Or the urgent egotisms of a material world may break in upon a man's happiness and make it no better than a deserted garden into which the little savage hands and voices of common children storm. John Stretton felt secure in Jess. He did not foresee the chance that some quite paltry circumstance might lay in wait for him, and use this very love of his as a provocation.

For there was an element of danger in the very fineness of his love for her. She was so much the one woman in the world to him that he was tempted to hedge her round with a tender yet human idealism. She was sacred. His egotism, if egotism it was, had a deep and devotional passion. He had the temper of a man who can love flowers, and love them with such gentleness that trampling feet and clutching hands can commit an outrage upon his love for them. His very gentleness might change to furious resentment and anger if some fool brute came blundering into his garden. For there are many of us whom a broken flower or a torn tree or a hurt dog can evoke more pity than the blubberings of a child. Stretton was made that way. His pity was challenged by the things which were most helpless, things with the least selfishness and cunning, and he included among them, not children, but the naturally sensitive child. He had been a sensitive child; at school, for his first two terms, the other sort of child had given him hell and gloried in it. He had not forgotten. And later the same sort of male child, grown up into a creature of swollen organs, had disgusted him with the cheap grossness of its attitude towards women. It was not that Stretton had no passion, but it was because his passion had a feeling for what was sacred and human and beautiful in the answering passion of the woman. It was sacred, an emotion that when once sealed became more sacred. He could not conceive it being pawed or leered at by any other man. All this was inherent in him, part of his most individual self, and sometimes a man does not realize his "self" until some rough and casual body jostles it.

If he was the lover and the man, Jessie Viner was the loved one and the mother, watchful, a little austere in her attitude towards other people, remembering all that Mellor had told her, and her man's own confession. Her eyes scanned the horizon, but she could see no storm cloud. Her man was happy. She heard it in his voice, and saw it in his eyes, and in the work of his hands. Life was good; it was going to go on being good. Their eyes were set towards the marriage like the eyes of two comrades wandering into a new and dangerous country. They knew that there were pitfalls in marriage, perils, the peril of taking things for granted, the peril of sameness, the peril of restlessness and of the desire for adventure. They had read and they had been told that that first ecstasy which is almost anguish does not and cannot last, but that it is the fire in which the greater and more enduring love is tempered.

Jess knew it, but she was not afraid.

"The days will come, John, when you will kiss me differently."

For a while he would not have it.

"But they will mean more," he insisted when her sincerity stood out for the truth.

"Yes, I think they will," she said, "and it will be my fault, partly, if they don't. Oh, my dear, I don't want our marriage to be a compromise."

"It never will be," he swore, holding her in the hollow of his arm, "because we know what matters. I have learnt a lot, Jess, by being made to suffer. I know the prize I have drawn in you."

"Dear."

She held close to him.

"But always love me, John, because love makes love between two people who understand each other. And sometimes you'll tell me you love me."

"Could I help it?"

"But men don't, you know. They get absorbed in other things, they take so much for granted. I've seen it."

"Where?"

"Well, my two sisters. One of them is going old and faded, just as though she were drying up. Her husband is quite a good sort, as regular and as solemn as a clock, but I always wish he would suddenly grow foolish and

playful and burst out with a “cuckoo.” I believe he gives her a sort of peck once a day. He always calls her “Rachel,” or “My dear,” in the same voice he uses when he takes a bus ticket or asks for the mustard. Now that sort of thing drives a woman of spirit mad.”

“I should think so,” said the man, and they went out through the orchard, laughing and loving each other.

But it was because they understood each other so well and looked at life with such clear and human eyes that they began to feel so sure of the future. For them the sea of marriage was not uncharted. They had courage and a good ship to sail in. There would be storms, but not the kind of storm which in the past had brought Stretton so near to shipwreck.

“It won’t happen again,” he said; “I feel that it can’t happen.”

And yet it was to happen.

One day late in May Thomas Viner came in and sat down to his midday meal with an air of preoccupation. His womenfolk were quick to feel that he had something on his mind. He had a way of drawing his right hand down his cheek when he was bothered.

“Some more meat, Tom?”

“Thank you, no, mother.”

They did not ask him what was worrying him, nor did he tell them until he had pushed his chair back and filled his pipe. He went and stood by the window, and lighting a match, sucked steadily at his pipe stem. Jess saw a little cloud of blue smoke drift across the sunlit window.

“I’m bothered about Jenny,” he said.

Jenny was a half-bred Hereford and Shorthorn cow, a famous milker, from whom Thomas Viner had bred several fine heifers, and his herd had come to have a local reputation. He valued Jenny, for the mother of the herd was in her prime, and he hoped to perpetuate the good strain in her.

“I have sent the lad down for Redhead.”

“It’s as bad as that!” said Mrs. Mary.

“I don’t like the look of her. She’s been off her feed.”

Jess was clearing the table. She was going out with the tray when her father called to her.

“Jess?”

"Yes."

"You'll be about? Your mother's going down to Hadworth."

"Yes, I shall be about."

"I'm going down to the 'ten acre.' If Redhead comes while I am out, ask him to look at Jenny and wait for me. I shall be back before three."

Redhead came while Thomas Viner was away down the farm. He left his American two-seater in the lane, and Jess, who was sitting at the window, saw a head with a hard black hat crammed well down on the ears bobbing along above the top of the hedge. Mr. Redhead was short, and he had a very springing walk, as though the lifting of his heels made him look taller. He was no unfamiliar figure in the life of the farm. He was a capable little man, with many a capable man's one failing, an inability to keep his eyes and his hands off women. It was common knowledge that you could trust him with a horse, a dog, or a bet, but he ceased to be responsible when he was caught by the flick of a petticoat.

Jess met him at the porch door. To her he was no more than a thick-set little man with a weather-beaten face, hard blue eyes and an ugly mouth. He was a great dandy, and his waistcoats and riding-breeches were highly decorative. As a veterinary surgeon he was fearless and capable.

"Good afternoon, Miss Viner."

Redhead always greeted a woman as though he had discovered suddenly that she was extraordinarily good-looking. He had an eye that gleamed and apprised and coveted.

"Mr. Viner in?"

Jess took Mr. Redhead with frank seriousness as Jenny's doctor and as nothing more. He was a common little man but he knew his work.

"Father is down on the farm, but he will be back before three. The cowman is about the buildings."

"I'll have a look at the lady. Whereabouts is she?"

"I'll show you," said Jess; "father had her put in a lodge by herself. He thought it better. He is very fond of Jenny."

"I don't wonder!" he said, giving her a droll look. "We men can't help it, can we?"

He was a wit, a horse wit, but Jess' sense of humour was not his. He was just a thing in breeches who came to do certain work for which he was paid. She went down with Redhead to the buildings, and across one of the great yards strewn with its clean straw towards a cowshed in the far corner. She was thinking of other things. She had put out her hand to the wooden latch of the shed door when a man's hand shot out to do it for her, and in doing it purposely touched hers.

"Allow me."

She was hardly aware of the contact; it had no significance, and she did not so much ignore it as fail to notice it. Redhead smiled. He thought her complacent.

"Thank you, Miss Viner."

"Will you have enough light here?"

"Plenty. Where's your cowman?"

"He is coming. Marsdell, here's Mr. Redhead."

The cowman came across the straw with the action of a man wading through water. He joined Redhead in the shed, and Jess remained at the door while Jenny's case was gone into. Redhead questioned the cowman. The vet was thorough and keen; he was gentle with animals, and his voice softened when he spoke to them. He touched them with hands that were careful not to frighten or to hurt. Human animal that he was he was at his best with beasts, being in rough sympathy with them, and this was a part of him which the world respected.

He came out, cheerful and brisk, polishing the heavy gold ring he wore with a green silk handkerchief.

"What do you think of her, Mr. Redhead?"

"She has got a bit of a temperature."

"Is it serious?"

Redhead was cautious.

"I shall have to watch her for a few days."

The job was done, and he forgot the cow and remembered the woman. The gate leading from the main yard was at the end of a passage between the great barn and the stable, and it opened upon the triangular piece of grass between the farm buildings and the house. Redhead was behind Jess, his

eyes fixed on her neck where the hair swept up from it. She had a very beautiful neck, and his glance fondled it. Reaching the gate, he pushed forward to open it, and here the proclivities of the man showed in a characteristic gesture, a crooking of the arm behind her at the level of her waist, a mere shadow gesture, for his arm hardly touched her body. But she felt it, and instantly resented it, yet for the moment neither of them had seen Stretton.

"Thank you, Mr. Redhead. I don't like being touched."

"Sorry," he said. "I thought the gate might swing back on you."

She drew aside, and then they saw Stretton. He was standing by the garden fence, and his figure had a curious rigidity. He did not move, but let them approach, and it was the expression of his eyes which gave Jess her first warning. He was not looking at her but at Redhead, and his eyes had a kind of brilliant glare in them.

In an instant she understood.

"John, this is Mr. Redhead. He has been to see Jenny. Mr. Redhead—Mr. Stretton."

"Pleased to meet you," said the vet.

At the sound of her voice Stretton had given a start like a man touched in the dark when he had suspected no one near him. His eyes left Redhead's face and turned to Jess, and as he looked at her the brittle glare went out of them. He seemed to draw a deep breath; his arms and shoulders lost their rigidity; his hands betrayed an almost imperceptible trembling.

"Is it?" he said.

Redhead was staring at him with hard-bitten curiosity.

"I think I have heard of you, Mr. Stretton."

He put out a hand and it was ignored. Stretton gave him one swift look, a look that was so scornful, so dangerous, so damning that even Redhead's thick skin was penetrated. He glanced at Jess. She was smiling, but her smile was so grey and transient that it was unlike a smile. She was watching Stretton, who had turned aside and was leaning against the fence and looking into the distance as though the other man was not there.

The situation was awkward. Redhead's turgid face had lost its expression of staring and almost truculent good nature.

“One of those jealous devils!” he thought. “And pretty swollen about the head, too, by God!”

He looked nasty. He pulled out his green handkerchief and began to polish his ring. He threw little, vicious glances at Stretton.

“Suppose Mr. Viner won’t be long?” he said.

“I’m here, sir.”

Thomas Viner’s square figure pushed through a field gate in the young green of a thorn hedge, and he came like a welcome human wedge splitting up this awkward and inarticulate group into its natural components. Redhead turned aside to speak to Mr. Viner, and Jess made a little movement of the head, her eyes fixed on Stretton’s.

“John, come and look.”

She took him away into the orchard, but he paused under the first apple tree. He had something to say.

“I’m sorry. I thought the cad touched you. I can’t stand that sort of man near you.”

“Dear,” she said, with her hand on his shoulder, “what does a little fool like that matter to you or to me?”

She took him and showed him her bees and a new hive which she had installed. She talked, and in a little while in the sunlight and the green shadows he seemed to have forgotten the angry disgust of a moment ago. Almost, it seemed to her, that he was unaware of it, that it had belonged to some sinister underworld in him, a world that was once more asleep.

XXXIV

MR. REDHEAD'S SENSE OF HUMOUR

JESSIE VINER had had her warning, and she was so wise in her acceptance of it that when Redhead came again to Romans Farm she made it her affair to be out of the way. She told nobody. Self-effacement seemed so simple a solution of a transient problem, like the taking away of a box of matches from two children, that it is more than probable that her common sense would have kept these men apart had it not been for the male cussedness of one of them.

Redhead drove home in a bad temper, calling someone "a damned, jealous, stuck-up snob." But between the calling of names and more serious and considered mischief there is a broad distinction, and where one man may curse and forget, another will laugh and remember. And Redhead laughed. He went into the Castle Inn at Kingsbury and had his usual drink and gossip in the private bar. It so happened that when he went in someone else went out of it, a young professional man in Kingsbury who was built on thin and supercilious lines and whose eyes said plainly to Redhead, "You vulgar beast."

"Hallo, another of your superior people, Mrs. Kennedy."

Redhead laughed, but there was anger behind his laughter, for to have such a sword-glance thrust into one's face twice in an afternoon was rather much for a bumptious little man's temper. All of us have our moments of illumination when we realize the amazing possibility that other peoples' dislike of us may be instinctive and reasonable. Redhead sat down and talked to Mrs. Kennedy. Men of Redhead's persuasion found it easy to talk to her. She had a wicked eye, a kind heart, and no illusions.

He told her about Stretton.

"Now what would you have said to such a chap? Just because I happened to be there alone with the girl he's sweet on."

"Jealous," said Mrs. Kennedy. "It might be a buttonhole for you, Mr. Redhead."

"No, I'm not taking it that way. A man can give you a look such as you wouldn't give a dog. Like that lawyer friend of yours, thin and shiny like a saint in a stained-glass window. What would you have done?"

Mrs. Kennedy laughed. “I think I would have put my arm round the girl’s waist.”

“By Jove,” said Redhead, “that’s an idea!”

The provocative suggestion stuck in his round head. He went home grinning over it, for if bullbaiting is dead there are other sports left to us, such as pulling a man’s leg and pulling it viciously. “All right, young fellah my lad! I’ll have a bit of a game with you!”

He paid two more visits to Romans Farm, but on neither occasion did he see Jessie Viner or John Stretton. It was not until his third visit that he was made to realize that Jess was avoiding him. Happening to arrive later than usual he saw Thomas Viner’s daughter picking flowers for the house; she pretended not to notice him; she disappeared, and though she did it well he realized that her disappearance was deliberate.

“So that’s it!”

Most men would have shrugged and have left it at that, but not so with Bob Redhead. Some of us remain pestilent and mischievous boys. The element of madness in Redhead had been challenged. The girl had dared him to a game of hide and seek, because my Lord Stretton was a jealous lord and Miss Slyboots had to humour him. Oh, very well, two people could play at this game of hide and seek.

He was cunning. He had surprised Jess only to lose her, but in walking back up the lane after his visit to Jenny Redhead saw what Jess had not meant him to see. Or perhaps not knowing the man and his spitefulness she did not consider it likely that she would have any further trouble with him. After all, why should she? He was just an irresponsible fool. The type is common, but it can be kept at a distance.

Through a thin place in the hedge where a tree had once stood Redhead saw Jessie Viner crossing the “fourteen-acre,” a meadow which lay between the farm lane and the heath. It was down for hay and still yellow with buttercups, but the grass was growing long and shadowy and all hazy with flower spikes. On the orchard side of this meadow the old thorn hedge had been suffered to grow as it pleased, and it hung like green cornice over the edge of the field. At the moment it was a mass of white blossom, a line of foam against the darker tints of the heath and the woods beyond. Jessie Viner was making her way back towards this hedge.

Redhead paused. He saw her reach the shadow of the hedge and move slowly along it. At the far end she turned and came back, loitering as though

she were waiting for someone. He noticed that she glanced towards the heath, and in following up her glance he saw that other figure, the figure of a man moving down over the heath to the field gate in the far corner. There were two gates to the "fourteen-acre," the one towards which Stretton was walking, the other opening into the lane not twenty yards from where Redhead was standing.

"So that's it!" he reflected. "The Lover's Walk, what! Now supposing another fellow were to butt in one afternoon, just for a joke, you know!"

He smiled and glanced at his watch.

"Six o'clock. What about six o'clock to-morrow?"

Thus did this Puck in riding-breeches and a billycock hat set the stage for John Stretton's undoing, much as a mischievous boy puts a match to dry grass without troubling to think where or how far the fire may spread. And Jess, wandering up and down under the thorn hedge on a still May evening, had no more thought than a bird of the snare set for her happiness. The lush grass was deepening at her feet, and the air was full of the scent of the May blossom. The heath rose to the blue of a clear sky, and in a little while the blue of it would change to pale gold. She was waiting for her lover. How was she to know that a little meddlesome fool of a man had left his car at the Rising Sun and walked up to the ambush with a chuckle of mischievous malice in his heart?

XXXV

SANCTUARY

THIS was what John Stretton saw as he came down over the heath.

The sunlight shone full upon the "fourteen-acre" and the old hedge with its whiteness and its band of shadow. Everything was very brilliant with the brilliance of a soft evening on the edge of June. A man might wander in the woods and fields on such an evening and feel that there is no guile in the world, no ugliness, no violence. Stretton was happy. He had the consciousness in him that within a month he and Jessie Viner would be married.

And then he saw the shadow-show down yonder, first one figure, then a second figure appearing suddenly from the green shadowiness of the hedge, something jaunty and aggressive in the male figure, something surprised and fugitive in the girl's. He saw her caught and held for a moment, her breaking away, her swift gliding bird-like flight along the hedge with the other figure pretending to pursue. He heard Redhead laugh. It was enough.

Jess never realized the nearness of a possible tragedy until she was in the lane, alone, and with the thorn hedge between her and the field. Her anger had sobered Redhead's sense of humour, and he had not followed her over the gate.

"All right, Miss Jess, a man's joke, you know."

She was trembling; she was hidden from him and he from her. It was very silent, but for the singing of a blackbird in one of the orchard trees. And then, in the silence of that great green field she heard a queer, indescribable sound, or rather, a medley of sounds, and her face went as white as the May blossom.

She ran back to the gate, unfastened the catch, and pushed the gate open. She saw. The two men were struggling by the hedge, but as she ran towards them it ceased to be a struggle. Redhead was held by the throat; he was shaken to and fro; his legs seemed to buckle under him, while his futile hands clutched at Stretton's wrists.

In that moment of fear and of anguish she had a woman's inspiration, her faith in her own voice. But if he did not hear it, did not understand it!

“John,” she called. “Dear John.”

She felt life standing still in her during that moment of suspense. Then the miraculous thing happened, for to her it was nothing less than a miracle. Stretton’s hands relaxed. She saw that half-strangled figure jerk itself away and slip to its knees. It crawled; it got up on silly, shaking legs and broke into a swaying trot; it came towards her with its turgid, terrified face.

“Run,” she said, “for God’s sake run, you fool.”

He passed her. That other figure, still hesitant, storm baffled, turned as though to pursue.

“John.”

She ran towards him, arms spread, her face the face of the Eternal Mother, divine yet human.

“John, dear John, beloved.”

She met him, body to body, her arms still outspread, restraining arms, yet ready to enfold him.

She touched him.

“John, dear man——”

He shook. He looked at her. His eyes came back out of the night.

“Jess! It’s you! Oh, my God, what have I done?”

He seemed to clutch at her as though clinging to love and life, to her who could save him. His head went down on her bosom, and she held it there with both her arms encircling it. He shook. He broke into a man’s tears, deep and passionate and terrible.

“Oh, my God, it’s all over. I can’t—I can’t——”

She held him and let him weep.

“There, there, I’m here, John, I’m always here. Nothing can hurt you now.”

He held to her, and her strength supported him.

“Jess, you can’t marry me.”

“There, there,” she said, “nothing can keep me from marrying you. Beloved, don’t you understand?”

He raised half-blind eyes to hers.

“I—I don’t—I——”

She drew his head down again into the circle of her arms.

“I’m yours; I must be yours, every bit of me. You will always think of me as yours, utterly and only yours. John, I’m your sanctuary. I’m between you—and that. It’s dead.”

THE END

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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.

A cover has been created for this eBook.

[The end of *The Secret Sanctuary* by Warwick Deeping]