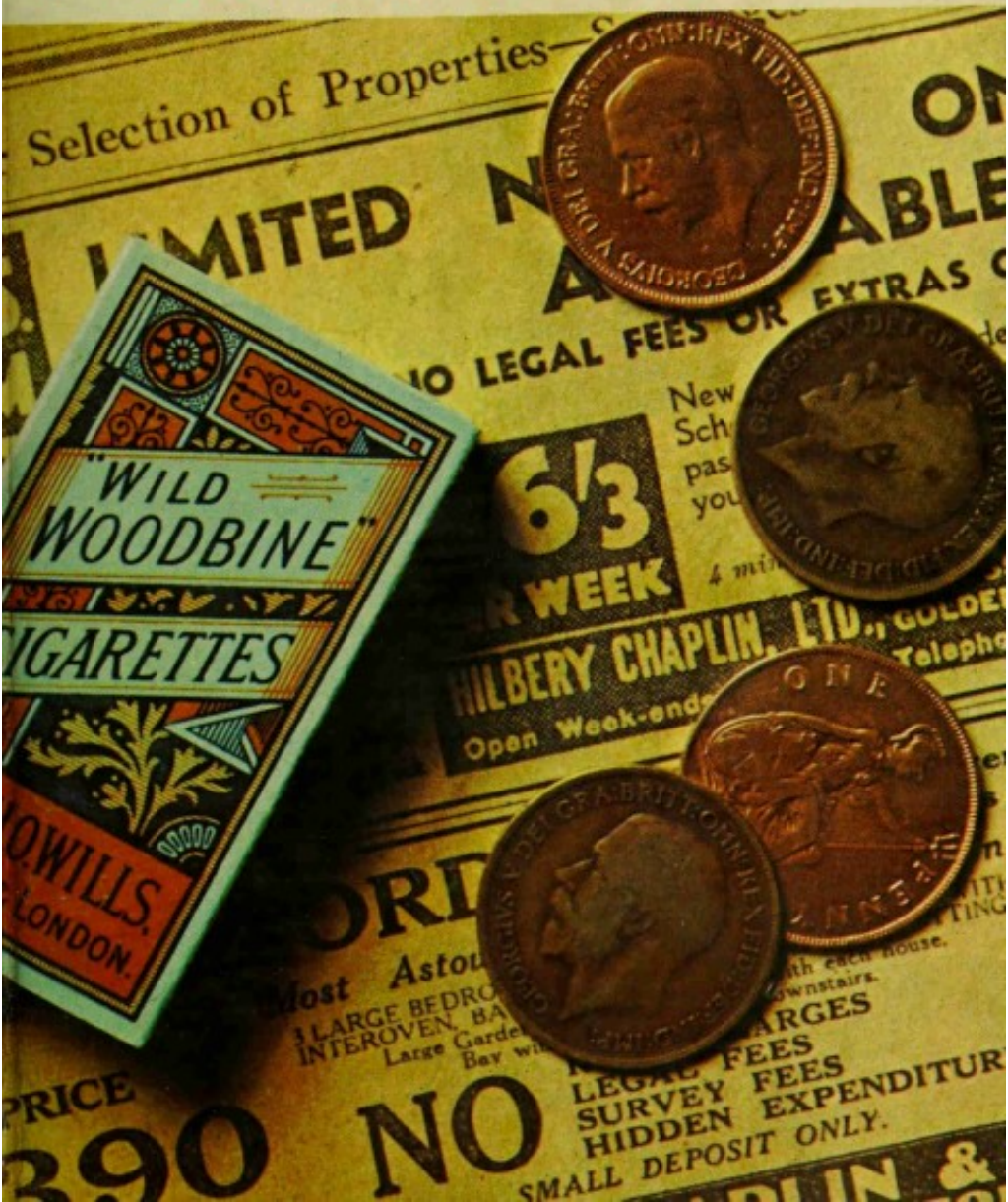
I'd do it AGAIN

FRANK TILSLEY



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I'D DO IT AGAIN

Frank Tilsley

Here is the very breath of those lost-for-ever, faraway 'good old days' of the Thirties: the world of ten Woodbines for fourpence, of new houses for only five pounds down for those lucky enough to be able to buy them, and of three hungry, near-demoralised men competing for every job. It is a real story about real people, rich in humanity, pathos, laughter and tears. It is a love story, too, of the true-to-life kind rare in fiction. One of Frank Tilsley's earliest novels, it is also one of his best.

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THE JUNGLE OF YOUR HEART
VOICE OF THE CROWD

Frank Tilsley

I'D DO IT AGAIN

Morley-Baker

LEEDS AND LONDON

Frank Tilsley
I'D DO IT AGAIN

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I'd Do It Again

I

I may be a thief but I'm not a fool. If I'd paid Andertons the rent of our rooms instead of giving Helen the money for the new coat Andertons wouldn't have let their kids play their damndest in the attic over our head and waken us up at six o'clock on Sunday morning. If I'd had half the guts then I have now I'd have made Anderton shut them up, rent paid or rent owing. If I'd made Anderton shut them up I wouldn't have spent the rest of Sunday morning helping Helen with the housework and generally trying to stop her feeling fed up at living in a hole like this, and I wouldn't have had to agree to go out Edgware way and look at those houses being advertised to let at a pound a week. Those were the circumstances that landed me in a pickle. If circumstances had not occurred in just that manner I should probably never have been landed in a pickle. But as I say, I'm not a fool, and I realize perfectly well that if I'd been a man of different character I should never have let these chance circumstances land me in a pickle.

Anyway, they did. We got a bus immediately after dinner and picked up the Edgware train at the Elephant. They charged us three shillings. The man in the booking office said there were no cheap day returns on Sundays. I was all for giving him the tickets back and going home—damn it, another seven shillings to it would pay the rent. But the look Helen gave me made me not care so very much one way or the other, and I followed her into the lift without another word. We never spoke in the train, just sat next each other, thinking. Helen maybe wondering whether the smart little chap opposite who kept looking at her legs under his carefully folded *Referee* would have been a better marrying proposition than a fellow like me. I just sat being sore about the three shillings. After all, if I hadn't let her have the money for

the coat I could have paid the rent. Why couldn't she have waited for a coat for a week or two?

But I'd only to look at her to see why she couldn't. A guinea coat, five shilling shoes and hat, and one and eleven penny stockings and she was the smartest looking girl in the coach, with all their expensive summer dresses and costumes. With her looks and style you couldn't blame her.

And if I did blame her I knew what she'd do. Flare up and threaten to go to work again. We'd tried that when we were first married: three pounds a week isn't much to marry on, and the thirty-five shillings Helen got made a big difference. But it was no good. I don't like having to get two breakfasts ready at half-past seven in a morning and coming home to a fireless grate and no meal in an evening, though I'd sooner do that in my own house than live in rooms with the Anderton kids playing ball in the attic over my head a couple of hours before it's time to get up. But the real rub is that a wife who works is tired whenever she feels like being tired, and you can't blame her. A wife's place, I say, is in the home. Though anything less like a home than the two upstairs rooms with the Andertons it would be difficult to imagine.

Helen didn't want a proper home any more than I did. But three pounds a week is nothing like so much as people who get more—or less—than three pounds a week imagine. If you have to look decent at work—that's the worst of a job in an office—and you've been married to the smartest girl in Camberwell for a couple of years, you've got nothing put by for a proper home by the time you've had a couple of holidays, paid the medical bills over Helen's miss last spring, bought a new suit, paid three pounds towards helping Helen's brother emigrate to Australia, lost eight pounds on the purchase and sale of your motor-bike, and kept up your instalments on the furniture and generally kept out of debt. We had enough to eat, went to the pictures twice a week, a dance perhaps twice a month, smoked as many cigarettes as the next couple, and had an occasional drink. But if Helen wanted a new summer coat only a couple of weeks after the holidays—I'd had to have them in May, because of the auditors coming in June—it meant leaving the rent over for a week. And we left the rent over for a week.

That three shilling fare rankled. And when we got out of the train at Edgware we found that the Grundy Farm Housing Estate was a threepenny bus ride out. Another shilling thrown away.

The houses were in a nice place. Edgware is very high and these houses were along a western slope, Canon's Park way. All we could see of Edgware, behind us, was a church over the trees, and a large country house.

In spite of the houses and bungalows it was more Grundy Farm than Housing Estate. The estate sloped down to a narrow river, winding through fields and trees, and beyond it meadows and hedges rose to a fringe of tree-topped hills. There had been rain in the night and the hot sun brought out all the country smells. The place looked pretty good to me, and Helen liked it, too.

There were several couples nosing about the gaunt skeletons of the homes that would soon be completed there, but farther along the half made road there was a row of houses properly finished, and in one garden a large board with a great sign: SHOW HOUSE. Inside a little pink-faced man with very good clothes and a rather uppish manner fastened on to us. We asked him about the houses to let. He looked surprised, and very superior. There were only four houses to rent at a pound a week. They were taken. The others would be twenty-five and thirty shillings, he said—but why pay rent? If we paid five pounds deposit and handed over our insurance policies and so forth and so on we could buy one. . . .

I felt pretty mad. I might have known the advertisements were a swindle —I would have known if I'd thought about them for five minutes.

All right, I thought, they've swindled us into coming, with their advertisements about houses to let at a pound a week, so I'll swindle them into showing us round properly, now that we are here. So I let the pink-faced chap show us all over the place, just as though I'd fallen for his sales talk about depositing five pounds and buying a house. He showed us through houses with one long room instead of lounge and dining-room, with lavatory and bathroom combined and separate, with large halls like another room and no halls at all, and some of them, the more expensive, with so many gadgets and built in wardrobes and things that you'd hardly need owe anybody's instalments but the building society's, so little furniture would you need. He showed us houses completed even to the laying of the paths down the garden and houses that were little more than miniature foundations in a muddle of planks and piles of sand and cement, paying particular attention to houses in such a littered and uncompleted state that he had to keep catching hold of Helen so she wouldn't fall.

Pretty soon this fellow with the pink face rumbles to the game I'm playing him, and he takes us to a row of bungalows right at the edge of the estate, about ten miles from Edgware or anywhere else I should think, by the amount of walking we've done. These, he says, work out at eighteen shillings a week, which is two shillings less than the houses advertised.

"Except you have to buy 'em," I say.

"If you can afford the deposit," he says, sarcastic like, "there's little doubt that they're far more economical to buy than to rent. Eighteen shillings is a very low rent for an establishment of this description." And he looks at me as though he's noticed for the first time that my clothes were not made in Savile Row. Been too busy looking at Helen, I suppose.

"If you can satisfy me the cost is only eighteen shillings for everything," I tell him, trying to bring him down a peg or two, "I'll buy half a dozen." And I start in to check his figures with a thoroughness that makes him a bit less uppish, and he has to admit that the eighteen shillings includes building society charges at a scale where a fifty pound deposit is made, not five pounds; that he's omitted to include water rate, and that he'd knocked ninepence off to bring it down to "even money." The exact weekly cost was twenty-two and sixpence, as I made him admit. He started to call me "Sir" again, as he'd done when he first saw us, and he took the first opportunity to have his attention attracted by a man in a car who wasn't looking for him.

We were glad to see the back of him and be able to nose round ourselves, without having to approve of an electric bath-water installation or comment on the quality of the decorations. They were only four-roomed box-like detached bungalows, really, the same as you'll see scores of any place where there's a lot of new building; but it was the position of them that took us: right on the fringe of the estate at the edge of one of those patches of woodland, with the river at the bottom of the garden and the sloping countryside beyond. It was like being in the very heart of the country, with the noise of the birds and a couple of crickets in the long grass, and the blossom still on the hedges, and the trees, heavy with leaves. We trailed through the long field grass to the bottom of the garden, hand in hand, friends again, for the time being, anyway. Only when you stood right at the bottom, by the hedge, could you see how big a patch of ground it really was. It was about twice the size of the allotment my old Uncle Fred had on the railway embankment, and he reckoned to make a pound a week out of it. There were about a dozen bungalows, half of them occupied, and already two of them had got gardens well under way: they gave you some idea of what could be done, even in a short space of time. If you had say a third of the garden as lawn, with flower borders at each side, and then the remainder for vegetables and fruit trees, you wouldn't half be able to get some stuff in. It was too late for potatoes, of course, and such things as marrows and cucumbers, but there would be grand late crops of peas and beans, carrots, spinach, turnips, and we were both very fond of lettuce and cabbage.

We walked back from the hedge and made for the house again. It was not decorated, yet, and there were no windows in, so the doors were open and we could wander about it as much as we wanted.

"We can't possibly afford it," said Helen, staring at the neat oak grate in the dining-room-cum-drawing-room.

"It's half a day's walk to the station and back," I said.

"And we haven't got five pounds." We explored the kitchenette. They would fit in a big kitchen cabinet, the pink-faced man had said. We argued about where it would go and then tried the bathroom.

"It's big as the kitchen," she said. It was a big bathroom, too. I could imagine Helen in that bathroom. It was a good bathroom. "The door," she said, "opposite the bedroom. That's good. No catching cold in a draughty landing."

"And the lavatory," I said. "All these new houses have indoor lavatories. A bit of all right."

The house in Camberwell where we have rooms was built in the days when men were masters in their own homes and drank like fish, and the lavatories were built as far away as possible from the houses for more reasons than one. I've limped from Andertons', in the winter, not knowing whether I've been constipated or frozen. Many a time.

I went out to see if there was a coal place at the side. I hadn't noticed one, but perhaps it was built in. It wasn't built in. No stairs, so no space underneath, of course. Have to build a shed of your own: cost another pound or two, that. I should have seen that whilst I was barging with pink face. I walked round the cinder path to make sure it wasn't at the back. Helen was standing in the windowless bay, looking out over the river. It was a sight worth looking at, too, with the afternoon sun on it, but at that it wasn't so good to look at as Helen. She's a lot more than just pretty. You can get used to a pretty face, but Helen's is the sort of face that seems to suit whatever she's thinking about. People who see her when she's happy think that they like her face because it's a happy face and people who see her when she's solemn think that she couldn't look her best any other way. When she was a kid her father used to goad her into anger because he said she was the nicest bad-tempered girl in London. But me, I know better than all of them. When we were first married she had a way of looking at me that was all looking at me and nothing else. There were no kings and millionaires in the world when Helen looked at me like that. There was just me. But lately there had

been worn shoes and shabby underwear and a dud wireless set, as well as me, and that was not so good.

And Helen was looking at that view of Middlesex with the sun melting the fringe of woods and the river at the bottom of the garden, and she was looking as though she meant it. "If I was a man," she said softly, hearing my feet crunch into the cinders, but not turning her head for a moment, "I'd build people homes like this in places like this."

I didn't tell her they were built here because this was the cheapest part of the estate, probably a sea of mud in wet weather and the river stinking like mad in dry. I didn't tell her that because I knew what she meant, and I felt that way about it too. And I suddenly thought that if she could feel that way about building places like this, how must she feel about a man who couldn't afford to get one for his wife? And then I realized she was no longer looking at the garden and the country, but looking at me, and I knew how she felt about a man who couldn't afford to get one for his wife.

We were as quiet on the tube, going back to the Elephant, as we had been coming in to Edgware. At Burnt Oak an aggressive woman in a tailored suit and horn-rimmed glasses left a *Sunday Observer* on the seat next to me and I began reading it. It didn't last for long, though: the football page is the dullest of any paper I've ever seen, and there was hardly anything about dirt-track riding. I wanted to read about dirt-track riding because once I'd been pretty good on a bike and half minded to try and break in on that game; and I think maybe I'd got a mad idea to do it after all. I wanted to get that bungalow for Helen more than I've ever wanted anything since we were married. It wasn't the bungalow itself I was worrying about—right out beyond Edgware there would be damnably inconvenient for my getting to the office in a morning, and Helen would probably be bored stiff in the winter, a lonely place like that—but I did want to be able to show her that I was something different from a cheap clerk who couldn't really afford to keep her. It's true I was a cheap clerk who couldn't really afford to keep her, but women don't understand these things, that a chap can be something more than his job lets him be. They think if a fellow's smart and he's got guts the boss will notice it and keep promoting him. They don't know that in nine cases out of ten it's more than a clerk's job is worth for him to let the boss see he's smart and got guts. Take me, for instance. The manager at our place is a man named Nolan. He gets eight pounds a week for making sure that Mr. Gaskell, the managing director, isn't bothered by anything going wrong with the office work; and spends half his time taking good care that

nobody else gets a chance to show Gaskell that they've any ability, and the other half worrying himself sick they might. If I did anything to get Gaskell's attention I'd be out with a week's extra money in my pocket. So when I get a good idea I tell Nolan and he says yes, it's a good idea, and he'll tell Mr. Gaskell. And he tells Mr. Gaskell. He forgets to tell Mr. Gaskell that it was my idea, but Nolan knows I can be relied on not to bother about that, so I've got what is generally known as a safe job. I'm the only one in the office can come late in a morning and not be grumbled at, and he doesn't stand by my shoulder trying to flurry me into making a mistake so I shall be impressed by how much cleverer he is than me. No, I'm well in with Nolan, but I'll jolly soon be well out if I show any ambition to be anything other than a cheap clerk.

As I say, women don't understand these things. Helen used to think of me as a dashing sort of chap who captained the best amateur team in Camberwell and drove a motor-bike with more recklessness than sense. She doesn't realize that I haven't changed, really; that I'm just as reckless as ever I was; that I've become stodgy only because that's the only way a chap like me can get a living at all.

And what a living! That's what began to get me fed up when I'd chucked the *Observer* down again and the train had dived underground beyond Golder's Green. I wouldn't mind so much her thinking me stodgy if I was able to show something for it—buy her a coat without having to owe a week's rent; get her a decent home; make it possible for her, anyway, to have a bit of liveliness. But this hand to mouth existence was a bit too thick, it seemed to me. There was yards in the paper about the problem of unemployment but—hell!—what about the problem of employment? Two million men without jobs might be tragedy, but give them two million jobs like mine and it's what I call misery. Perhaps if I'd ever been unemployed I'd have felt different but personally I could never feel a damn for the unemployed. I was certainly fed up that Sunday night.

I was fed up and sort of hoping that Helen would say something nasty so that we could have a real set to and clear the air. But she just sat silent in the almost empty coach, staring straight in front of her and never saying a word. It was just as the roar of the train thinned down enough to be able to speak quiet and yet be heard, as it drew into Charing Cross as a matter of fact, that she half turned and looked at me, in a funny way, I thought, and said: "I won't go to work again, love, if you tell me not to."

Somehow it made me feel more miserable and fed up than ever. I thought she must be feeling rotten over that bungalow to act this way. So I

said: "You please yourself. If you want to very much I suppose you'd better." But I said it in a sort of down-hearted voice so she wouldn't make any mistake about how I felt about it. The train had moved out of the station again and our coach was roaring through the tunnel, so I couldn't hear what she said, but I got the impression I hadn't given her the right answer. After that she just went quiet again, and kept avoiding looking at me. I took her hand once, but she just kept hers so limp I soon let go of it.

We got off at the Elephant and got a tram. The bus is much better, of course, but we live just beyond the penny stage. We went on top of the tram and I've never seen South London look so dismal as it did from the top of that tram that Sunday night. And Andertons was a match for it. When we let ourselves in Mr. and Mrs. Anderton had gone out for a drink and the two kids were yelling downstairs. We crept up to our rooms as softly as we could, but they'd heard us all right and made the devil of a racket. Helen walked along the landing to the bottom of the attic steps and called to them, nice and quiet like, that their Mum and Dad had gone to the corner shop and wouldn't be long, and they'd better go to sleep. But one of them shouted "shut up" and they carried on worse than ever. Half a week's pay would be cheap for the fun of paddling their backsides with a slipper.

Living upstairs we have to use the bathroom as a kitchen, washing up in the lavatory bowl (and choking it up all the time with tea leaves and so forth) and we have a gas-ring on a little table. I could see Helen was tired out and just about all in so I got the kettle and filled it from the bath tap with a cup (you can wangle the kettle sideways and get water in it all right, but you spill it getting the kettle away from the tap again). By the time I'd got the gas-ring lit—I had to hunt for some matches in the bedroom, Anderton having pinched the box I'd left in the bathroom—Helen had set the table and cut some bread and butter. She wouldn't let me brew the tea, then; finding my old slippers and telling me to change my shoes—I bought them cheap, at the market, and they're a bit too small. Several hours' walking on them had made me know I had feet, and I was jolly glad to get them off. By the time I'd got my slippers on Helen had poured out my tea, and put sugar and milk in, too, and it isn't often she does that. I couldn't make her out. She seemed —shy, somehow.

The kids in the attic had fallen asleep when we were finished, so we had to be very quiet with the pots, although the Andertons, who'd come back again now, were making no end of a noise downstairs, up to some sort of larking or other. I brought the last of the pots, but Helen wouldn't let me stay

and help clean them, as I usually do—it's quite a performance, washing a few supper things in that bathroom.

We went to bed as soon as she'd finished—it was ten o'clock and we were both tired. It was quite dark in the bedroom, a little square box with a single narrow window, and we had to switch on the light. Helen got the shirt I wear for nights since my pyjamas gave up the struggle, and her own nightie, and we both got undressed, me standing on the oilcloth by the door and Helen standing at the corner of the rug by the foot of the bed, the only two places where you can't be seen from the street—the curtains at the window don't draw properly, and the blind is broken. I finished first and got into bed—the one who's last has to walk along the cold oilcloth to switch out the light. Helen was only a moment after me, and soon scrambling into bed.

I shouldn't have been surprised if she'd gone right to the edge of the bed, as she sometimes does when she's vexed or fed up, but she didn't, and we lay on our left sides, both our knees up—as though, if we were upright instead of lying down, she would be sitting on my knee. That's the way I like it best, with my two arms round her, and her breasts, one in each of my hands. Sometimes she says: "My breasts are cold, do keep on warming them," and then I know not to take my hands away, and I lie quiet as a mouse until her steady breathing and the knocking of her heart at my left hand tells me she's asleep, and I carefully get my arm from underneath her, and turn round and go to sleep myself. I know it's only a waste of time trying to keep her awake, then. But this night she didn't tell me her breasts were cold. Her feet were cold, all right, where they had crossed the oilcloth to switch out the light—she had them pressed on my legs, warming them, and prickling my legs into gooseflesh—but her breasts were not cold. Her breasts were hot, and her heart, it was racing away so that I could feel my hand trembling to the speed of it.

With Helen in that queer mood I didn't really want to risk a quarrel, now, but my own heart was pounding, too, and pretty soon, when my right hand was properly warm, I was holding her right breast through the neck of her nightie, and slowly moving the point between my fingers, as you might fidget with a cigarette you're smoking. I always imagine that perhaps that excites a girl, but I don't really know whether it does or not. Helen just lay very still and breathing hard, waiting for what I should do next, I suppose, but whether waiting in anger or expectation I couldn't know. I kissed the back of her neck, that was prickly, rather, where the hair had been trimmed

neat, and I tried to whisper in her ear, but I was breathing so noisily that she couldn't hear, and only rubbed herself with her hand under the bedclothes.

"I love you, dearie," I said, quite loudly and awfully it sounded, more as though I was answering the challenge of the room than speaking to her. Then I took my free hand from her breast.

"No," she whispered, "no." But her voice was too low for me to be able to tell whether she really meant no or not. I tried again, but she stiffened her body, and I brought my hand back to her breast. And then she whispered something else; I couldn't be sure, but I thought she said: "Not like that," which was like as not, but if not like that, then like what?

I was a fool, I decided, for starting that sort of work on a night like this, so very soon I took my hand off her breast and just left it at that. And then after a bit I muttered something about "pins and needles," so she wouldn't think I was vexed, and got the arm that was under her away, too. I kissed her neck again for if she hadn't properly heard me say about pins and needles. Then after a few minutes I made my voice sound fuddled with sleep and said: "Goo' night, love," and turned on my other side, the side I sleep on. I made a choking noise, too, and coughed, so she'd think I was already asleep when I turned over. I was soon asleep.

II

I wakened with a nasty taste in my mouth and the sense that something was wrong. The street lamps were still on and people moving about outside, so I couldn't have been asleep so long.

Helen was sobbing fit to break her heart.

Her face was in the pillow, and her shoulders, that were all uncovered, were heaving something awful. I'd never seen her cry like this before; never seen anybody cry like this, it was awful. I tried to speak to her, and made some sort of fumbling attempt to raise her up from the pillow, but she just took no notice of me at all, just lying there sobbing and moaning and making funny little choking noises that properly scared me. And then all of a sudden she wasn't crying at all, but laughing like mad in a panting, gasping sort of way that made my blood run cold. I pulled her up from the pillow and she sat there with the lamp-light from outside streaming over her, her face all twisted, and the back of one hand to her mouth, and her hair all fuzzed up into a curly ball that made her face look very white and small. And she kept on bawling out with long, choking laughs that made me think of Andertons' kid that had whooping cough last winter. I kept on asking her to stop, and tried to get hold of her hands, but she managed to keep them away from me, and the more I got into a panic the worse she got. Long peals sure to waken the house up, sure to waken the neighbourhood up, you would think. I didn't know what to do. Something bubbled inside me and I had to stop myself from yelling like a kid. Helen tried to say something, but her words were tumbled out too quickly by her laughter, and then at last she got it out.

"Go on!" she managed to say at last, choking and spluttering over it, and then yelping with insane laughter. "Stop me! If you're a man, stop me!" She scrambled into a kneeling position on the bed, sweat and tears pouring over her face. "If you can't do anything else," she gasped, "perhaps you can stop me laughing at you!" And she let out another idiotic howl that froze my blood, and tried to rip off her nightdress. It was only a thin imitation silk affair, but the fancy top of it must have been made of stronger stuff and pull as she could with both hands it wouldn't tear. But it pulled it right up into the back of her neck, so that the front of it gaped down below her chest and her two breasts hung out and forward, as she leaned towards me, moving

slowly as her body rocked, as though they were swimming slowly through deep water. And then in a sort of frenzy she started swearing at me, screaming words I never even thought she knew. “Take me, by Christ!” she shouted. “If you call yourself a man! Take me!”

And then I saw red, as the saying is. I gave her a smack across the face that knocked her off her knees. And then I grabbed the top of her nightie and pulled. It ripped open for me all right.

III

It seemed a jolly good time for asking him, when I came to think about it. Nolan, our manager, I mean. He'd been to his sister's funeral, a few days before, and since then he'd been particularly decent with me. Miss Nixon, who does the invoices—she, young Potter, who helps me with the books, and myself, we share a small office (Accounts) that leads off the General—Miss Nixon says that Mr. Nolan's sister died of consumption (though how she can possibly know anything about it I've no idea), and that Nolan himself is a bit the same way. That's why he's such a lean, grey face, she says—lantern-jawed, she calls him. She said he'd been a bit better tempered because he was worrying about how long he'd be following her—she's awfully morbid, Miss Nixon, though you wouldn't think so to look at her. She loves paying shillings to gipsies at fairs to hear what people she knows are going to die and have bad luck.

Anyway, Mr. Nolan had certainly been all right with me. He'd signed my expense sheets without a second look at them, and left me to choose the new boy for the warehouse. I'd always said I'd never ask for a rise, but with Mr. Nolan all right, he'd have to admit that I'd got one overdue, and a big one. Old Weatherley, who had done the job up to three years ago, had had five pounds a week, and the man who'd had it before him had five pounds ten. When Mr. Gaskell had given me his job he'd said I was really too young to have it, but if I was successful he'd see I was suitably remunerated. That was how Mr. Gaskell put it—suitably remunerated. I'd had ten shillings extra three months later and since then—nearly three years—nothing. Mr. Gaskell could hardly consider that being suitably remunerated, three pounds a week for a five pound a week job. It was all right having big ideas about not asking for a rise, but the more I thought about it the more I realized that if I played my cards right I'd get one, and a good one. It would have to be a good one, if we were going to have that bungalow at Edgware.

I was working with Mr. Nolan all Monday morning. I'd got some figures out for him of a subsidiary company Mr. Gaskell had formed to buy goods we wanted from firms who would no longer serve us, and Mr. Nolan was what he called checking them—that is, inking in my pencilled figures so that, when he had rubbed them out and taken the sheets in to Mr. Gaskell, everything would be in his writing. That sort of thing used to get me mad,

but now I saw it was just the best possible thing for me—Nolan knew a thing or two, and one of them was that he wouldn't find many young fellows stick for it like I do.

I didn't ask him right away—a bit too pointed that—but waited until afternoon. It was about four o'clock when I tapped on the door of his office and walked in. He looked over the top of his roll-topped desk at me—he has it in the middle of the room with the raised part a barrier between him and the door, I don't know why—grunted something, and carried on writing. He always grunts. His instructions to the staff consist of two or three main words, clues you might say, and a series of grunts. If anything goes wrong, then, he can blame the staff for not doing exactly what he said.

He stopped writing and looked up. "Wha'd'ya want?"

I didn't beat about the bush or get nervous. I told him I wanted a rise. He pouted a thick underlip so high it nearly reached the long grey hairs that jet from his nostrils, and lowered his brows over his small, dark eyes.

"You know Mr. Gaskell's cutting down the office expenses all he can," he grumbled, looking fed up with me. "You know they're up on last year."

"My wages are not up on last year," I said.

He stared at me. "And they're not going up this year," he said. "Good Lord, man, how old are you? Twenty-four? Four pounds a week isn't bad for twenty-four."

I smiled. That explained him being so crabby.

"Three pounds a week," I said, "not four." If he thought I was already getting four he'd be expecting me to want a fiver. If I kept my wits about me I ought to stick him for four pounds five.

"I mean three," he said, without turning a hair. "Three pounds a week isn't bad for twenty-four— —"

"It's damned bad," I blazed out, "for a job that's always before been worth a fiver. What's my age to do with it except that I can do my job better than old Weatherley did, who got nearly twice as much?" I was trembling with rage—the ready way he'd corrected himself, as though it had been three pounds he'd meant, and not four. He had thought I'd been getting four pounds a week, but wasn't going to let on his mistake. Smart, I suppose he thought it, to correct himself as quick as that. Why, if I hadn't blurted out that I was only getting three, like that, I could have taken four—I make the wages out, and pay them—I'd opened a new wage book only last week—if

I'd cared to take the risk I bet I could have got away with it: Nolan doesn't look at the wages twice a year, and Mr. Gaskell never. It was almost like being cheated of a pound. I'd brought a bank statement into Nolan's office with me, so I could have something to talk about if somebody was in with him or if for some other reason it wasn't a good opportunity to ask him, and my hand was trembling so much that it was fluttering the paper.

Nolan screwed up his face until his eyes nearly disappeared. "You know what you can do if you're dissatisfied," he said sharply, and turned back to his papers.

"Yes I do," I replied, "and I'm going to do it."

But it wasn't what Nolan meant. I swung out of his office and slammed the door. And I went straight across the General to Mr. Gaskell's office. I knew it was daft, trying to go over Nolan's head, but I was so mad. I rapped loudly on Mr. Gaskell's door, because it is a very big room—bigger than the General office—and his desk is away by the window so that he often can't hear people knocking at his door. I heard him call, faintly, and walked in.

Mr. Gaskell is the managing director, chairman, principal shareholder, and general big noise. There are two other directors—Mr. Fattorini is interested only in the advertising side, he has a big agency of his own, and I've never even seen Sir Abe Pangbourne—so Mr. Gaskell has everything his own way. He's a great, fat man with that air of being about to burst a blood vessel that you see with so many great, fat, London business men. He sits at a massive walnut table under the window that looks on to the Strand and everybody in the place is frightened to death of him except Miss Nixon, who smacked him across the face one Christmas Eve he had run her in his Bugatti to Victoria—we had all stayed after five o'clock to celebrate with some chocolate and wine the travellers had left us. We had all had too much, even Miss Nixon, but she had not had as much as all that. I wasn't frightened of him either, just this one particular time. I stood by the side of his desk, without fidgeting or anything, and asked him straight out for an advance.

He made impatient exclamations. Why didn't I see Mr. Nolan about it? I told him the second instalment.

"Then I'm afraid you can't have it," he said. "Mr. Nolan is quite right: we've got to cut down office expenses. How much d'you get now?" He didn't know how much I got but he knew I wasn't going to get any more.

"Three pounds," I said. "I'm twenty-four. I've been here five years and I've had Mr. Weatherley's job for three. And I do it satisfactorily."

"Of course you do it satisfactorily," he said, sticking out his fat chin in that way he has that's simply asking somebody to hit it—one good sock at his chin like that and you'd knock his head clean off his shoulders, "that's what you get paid for."

I kept my temper. I watched the light glinting off the two magnificent diamond solitaires he wears on his two fat fingers, but I kept my temper.

"My job," I said, as quietly as I could, "is a responsibility." It is too. I bank sometimes a thousand pounds a week, a good deal of it cash, and draw all the wages and petty cash, two or three hundred a week, on open cheques. I told him that, and he sat up and took notice. I knew what he was thinking, right away. I suppose that's how you get a big Bugatti and diamonds like footballs on your fingers, being quick on the uptake like that.

"You don't get advances for being honest," he said, quickly. "You're expected to be honest. That's what prisons're for, people who can't be trusted to be honest." Even he saw that was a bit thick and he toned it down. "How much did you want?" he asked, but he didn't ask it so I might think I'd get it. I knew I wouldn't get it. So, feeling stubborn, I said "Five Pounds." I might as well be refused five pounds as four pounds, and anyway five pounds was what I did want, really. I ought to have five pounds.

"A two pound advance!" he shouted. "That's ridiculous!" It wouldn't be ridiculous, I thought, if you'd given me a ten shilling advance every year for the past three, as you jolly well ought. But I didn't say anything, just stood respectfully at the side of the big walnut table, while he gave me an indignant lecture. But he wasn't really serious about the lecture. I knew what he was serious about, really, and I knew that even when I was walking out of his room again he was ringing for Nolan. I could hear the bell buzzing faintly in Nolan's office as I stamped through the General. Two typewriters stopped clattering and the office boy stopped rattling the cups as I passed through, but I didn't care about them seeing I was mad. I knocked a tray of letters off one of the desks with my jacket, and kicked open the door of Accounts with such force that the door jammed. I heard Nolan come out of his office, at that moment, and I hoped he'd seen it.

Young Potter pretended to get on with his day book additions and Miss Nixon didn't say something that looked as though it had been going to be funny. When I get mad I look mad, and there was nothing but work done in that office for the next few minutes.

And then Nolan came in. He stood and glared at me.

"Wha'd'ya want to tell him that for?" he demanded. "Wha'd'ya want to ask *him* for a rise for?"

We pretended Miss Nixon and young Potter were not standing at the tall desk with their ears flapping with excitement.

"I didn't want to," I said; "I wanted you to give it me." I got up from the little desk where I work and stood and glared back at him. Nolan's big enough not to be used to people bigger than himself. His voice changed to a grumble.

"The old man's playing hell about it."

What Mr. Gaskell had to play hell about I don't know.

"He says that in future," began Nolan, and then paused and adjusted the tone of his voice. "He says that in future you've got to take somebody to the bank with you. Dangerous, you know, going alone with large amounts of money. . . ." What I felt must have shown in my eyes, because Nolan looked uncomfortable. "There's all these snatch and grab raids nowadays," he muttered.

"Sure," I said—I remember what I said because I was so surprised to hear myself talking so cool and collected when inside I felt like murder, "sure; a great strong chap like me's just the sort they'd pick on." He gave me a pretty straight look, at that, but he didn't say anything. I suppose he just walked out of the room, but I only remember sitting down and staring at the cash book, on the desk in front of me, and the office boy bringing in my cup of tea with the three lumps of sugar in the saucer, and that when I thought to drink it the sugar had melted in the little ring of tea he'd spilt into the saucer.

I'd not told Helen I was going to get her the bungalow at Edgware, because I'm not the sort of fellow who counts his chickens before they're hatched, but I was just as determined to get it as though I had told her. I didn't care what I had to do to get it, so long as I wasn't found out—anyway at once. I'd cheerfully have split Gaskell's fat head open with a poker if I could have relied on, say, six months on which to enjoy the proceeds. It's better to live like a lion for a day, somebody once said—Mussolini I suppose—than like a lamb for a year. Or perhaps it's for ever. Anyway, you know what I mean, and that's just how I felt about it. I'd sooner have had Helen for six months as it was last night than for a lifetime as it had always been before. And I certainly would have split Gaskell's fat head open with a poker if I could have relied on those six months.

I hated Gaskell. I thought I'd hated him before, but I was only a learner then. Before it was only that I hated the way I was frightened of him. But now I hated him because he was ruining everything between Helen and me, and because he thought I was such a cheap-jack that I might run off with some of the firm's money. I suppose he thought I hadn't got the brains to sit back in a chair in an expensive office and run a half swindling mail-order business by unscrupulous advertising on the one hand—getting deposits from people who thought the orders would be sent on the first payment, instead of the last—and unscrupulous buying on the other—forming unofficial subsidiary companies for going into liquidation after looting the people who made the goods we wanted. I suppose he thought I hadn't even got the brains to understand the meaning of all the figures I was continually getting out for him. Well, he was wrong. The only difference between me and him was that I was educated at a Council School and he was educated at a Public School, and had lots of money and influence and credit. I'd just as much brains as he had, and I'd take all the risks he takes, and more. A lot more, for the chance of being in his shoes for six months. I'm not one of these Bolshies who think it's wrong to make a pile out of exploiting other people. If the other people knuckle under to it then it's their fault. I'd sooner live like Mr. Gaskell for six months than live under a Soviet Commonwealth, or whatever it would be called, for the rest of my life. I don't know whether I envied or hated him most.

Hated him, I suppose. Of course I realize now that he didn't really think there was any possibility of my running off with the firm's money—he'd have had me out of there in quicksticks if he did. He just wasn't taking chances on any one person, me or anybody else, and he was probably annoyed that Nolan had let just one person do the bankings, and had chewed him up about it. But though I realize it now, I didn't then. I pictured him as thinking that he'd scuttled any boats I might be desperate enough to take, and the idea of it gradually got me boiling. I'm no accountant, but I know enough about books and figures to be able to diddle Mr. Gaskell, and Nolan too. I won't say I'd get it past the auditors, but I won't say that I wouldn't, either. I'd have a jolly good shot at it. I kept thinking of how easy it would have been to take the extra money and put it down in the wage book. That's the sort of bold and simple thing you can get away with. There are forty names in the wage book and naturally Nolan can't remember all of them—how much all of them get, I mean. He hadn't remembered mine, anyway. And that's the sort of thing the auditors would pass, too. They'd expect a man doing the work I'm doing—next to the manager I've the best job in an office of nine—to have about five pounds a week. I'd been a fool not to keep

my mouth shut when Nolan made his mistake about my wage. The more I thought about it the madder I got. I kept on trying to think of something else simple and bold, like that, but I couldn't. I was going to try something, all right, but I wasn't going to act the fool and start pinching any money that I couldn't cover up with a reasonably good chance of getting away with it.

At five o'clock I still hadn't thought of anything, and I was beginning to get a sneaking feeling that very soon I wouldn't want to think of anything. That, I thought, was the difference between people like Mr. Gaskell and me. At that I swore, aloud, and slammed the cash book shut. I sent young Potter into the General for the A—K directory, and when he brought it 'phoned up the Grundy Farm Estate. Curiously enough the pink-faced man answered—I recognized his voice at once. I told him I'd decided to have the bungalow we'd been looking at yesterday. When did he want the five pounds? I didn't care who heard me talking about five pounds I was going to steal from the firm, although as a matter of fact there was only young Potter in the office, and as he only gets twenty-seven and sixpence a week I suppose he thinks it's easy to save five pounds out of three pounds a week.

The pink-faced man's voice said that he'd have the agreements ready to sign if I'd go down to Edgware the next night. "There's no other payments to make, sir," he trotted out glibly, half sneering it seemed to me, "no legal expenses, road charges or other hidden expenses——"

"You don't need to tell me," I interrupted him. "D'you think I don't know why it's fifty pounds dearer than it should be?" And I hung up on him.

IV

I took, not five pounds, but eight pounds three shillings. It was the exact amount of a rebate on certain purchases we had made. We get forty or fifty pounds a month in various rebates on cash purchases we make and as there are no ledger accounts for these cash amounts I have a special column in the cash book in which to enter them. The only check on them is not an auditor's check but Nolan's. Every quarter I have to give him a list of all the cash purchases we have made and another list of all the rebates I have received, and he sees that the rebates average one per cent of the purchases. But this particular eight pounds three shillings was rebate of an account with a firm that had just been wound up, and the purchases had been included in the previous quarter's list. The chances were just about a hundred to one against it ever being discovered that I had put the money into my pocket instead of into the firm's bank—we have a good system of book-keeping and checking but there are always occasional items like this that aren't covered and where the employers have to rely on the honesty of their employees.

I felt pretty good when I turned into the Strand that night at half-past five. It was an extraordinary stroke of good luck that something like that should happen to turn up that particular morning. I reckoned it was two months since such a good opportunity had last occurred, and would probably be another two months before it would happen again. However long it was I would wait. Dishonesty is like anything else. If you're systematic it's long odds on your being successful. It's only when you lose your head you come a cropper. You can tell that by reading the reports in the newspapers of people who're caught. You find nearly always that they've got away with it for ages whilst they've been careful, and then they've got reckless and started taking money not as they safely could, but as they've needed it. But I'm not like that. I can be cautious with anybody, where it's really necessary. I'd been cautious about my job—that was why I'd kept well in with the manager. But now I'd made a mess of that, and I could see that Nolan was going to be as down on me as on anybody else. So I'd have to be as cautious about soaking the firm for the money it wouldn't give me, as I'd previously been cautious about my job. It was a funny thing but try as I might I couldn't remember what similar opportunities of taking money I'd had in the past. You see I'd never thought about it then. I'd just paid it all into the bank and made the necessary entries in the books without a thought as to whether I

could have taken it if I'd wanted. Tomorrow, I thought, as I turned up Duncannon Street, I'd have to go through the cash book for the past year or two and get some idea of what I could have done if I'd wanted, and that would give me a good estimate of how much I'd be likely to wangle in the future.

There were crowds of people round the buses that line up in Duncannon Street and I could only get along very slowly, but I didn't mind that. I'd not to be at Edgware until eight o'clock so I had plenty of time to get some tea in a Lyons' and catch an early train. I'm usually bad tempered in crowds: there's plenty of me and it seems to get in the way. But now I felt just the opposite. I felt—superior to them, somehow. Sorry for them. I'd eight pound notes in my pocket, and I don't suppose anybody else in that crowd, pushing into buses to get home on a Tuesday evening, had eight pounds in their pockets. But it wasn't just the eight pounds. I'd had more than that several times—starting off on holidays, when I bought my motor-bike, when I got some insurance when my Dad died, when I bought Helen's engagement ring: I paid twelve pounds for that; a year's savings. It was more than just having eight pounds, and more than just what I was going to do with it. It was the way I'd got it. I thought: there's probably not another chap in all this crowd would do what I'm doing for eight pounds. Not for any number of pounds. And not if they were starving. They wouldn't take the risk, I thought. Because however systematic I was going to be there was always a risk. Suppose, for instance, the people who'd paid this rebate found the amount was wrong and wrote in about it? The amount wasn't wrong so far as I knew, I'd carefully checked it. But there were all manner of very unlikely things like that could happen. And there were the auditors. You never could tell with auditors. They let all manner of things that seemed important to me pass without checking them, and then would be fussy as old women over other things that didn't seem to matter. But the auditors had only just finished for this year and I wasn't going to get windy about something that mightn't happen next year.

I kept on thinking about the auditors, though, because it made it exciting to think of them. I was so excited I could hardly eat my tea. I'd got the money in an insurance envelope, sealed, stamped, and addressed to myself—I'd had a daft idea that something might possibly go wrong and I could slip out of the office and get rid of the money like that. I kept on pressing my hand against my jacket pocket, so that I could feel the stuffed envelope. I didn't pull it out and keep looking at it, though. You never knew who might happen to see you in a place like Lyons'.

It was only quarter past six when I got out into Charing Cross Road. There were still crowds of people streaming along the pavement, and it was grand to saunter along through the cool summer evening and feel sorry for them. I was half sorry Helen wasn't with me, but I hadn't breathed a word to her. I wasn't going to tell her we'd got that Edgware bungalow until we'd got that Edgware bungalow. I was going to have the time of my life, telling her, when I got home. And I wasn't going to tell her I'd had a rise, as I'd first intended. I just wasn't going to tell her anything. I knew what I was going to say and I knew it would be just right.

I stopped at the big ironmongers' in that street nearly opposite the Garrick, I forget what it's called—Green Street, I think. With that other three pounds I'd got I was going to pay for the removal, a deposit on some more furniture, curtains and things that we'd need right away, and some garden tools. I wanted a spade, fork, rake, and one or two other things. Twelve shillings should be enough, I found, and then I saw that the time was nearly seven o'clock and I made for Leicester Square Underground.

I don't know what made me stop at that Elan shop. I must have passed the place a thousand times before and never even noticed it. But this time I stopped and stared in the window, a narrow window but well stocked. Tastefully stocked, too, with the silk stockings on dummy legs any particular girl would be timid to show much of and the underwear all set out fancy on little stands. I don't know what made me go inside—I can't remember for the life of me that I really intended to go inside, but there I was, standing tongue-tied in front of the girl behind the counter.

I swallowed hard, remembered that the money was still in that confounded insurance envelope, and managed not to wipe my face with my handkerchief.

"I want to spend three pounds on underwear for my wife," I said.

For a moment the girl looked as uncomfortable as I felt. You'd have thought she'd have been glad of an order like that, but she didn't look glad. She looked as if she was thinking I probably hadn't got a wife and if I had the underwear wasn't for her.

"What d'you want?" she asked at last; "panties, nighties, petticoats, cami-knicks, step-ins . . .?"

This time I did wipe my face with my handkerchief. I wiped the back of my neck and ran the handky between my neck and collar. I wasn't going to say it was my wife's birthday or anything like that, not if I was hanged for it.

"I leave that to you," I said, "but I want three pounds' worth. I mean three guineas."

There was nothing bogy about the agreement I had to sign. I read it very carefully before I signed it—I wasn't going to be let into anything I couldn't weather—and then I paid the five pounds. When I paid the five pounds I was sorry, for the moment, that I'd bought all that underwear for Helen—the pink-faced man was there and I'd sooner have taken five pounds from eight than just pull the exact amount out of my pocket. They gave me a receipt and I signed some more forms—application to the building society for the mortgage, and another to an insurance company for guarantee of the balance. It was nearly nine o'clock before I got out of the estate office, and the pink-faced little man ran me down to the bungalows in a car. He seemed pleased with himself.

"You got a bargain," he said, as we got out opposite the one we had been through on Sunday. "You got a bargain. You got a permanent view."

"Yes," I said. "We got a permanent view. That must've cost a lot, that permanent view." But he didn't see it.

"See," he said, "I put the 'sold' notice up right away."

There was a little board with "sold" painted on it, stuck up by the window.

"I know," I said, "I know, I know. Sold. That means the people who buy 'em."

But I liked it all right. I liked it fine. Only it was so far from the station. I found out that night just how far it was. I'd got my return ticket from Edgware to the Elephant, and one and sixpence to last me out the whole of the week, and I thought I better walk to the station instead of getting the bus.

I'd got Helen's undies in two parcels that just stuck in my jacket pockets all right, and I set off for the station best foot forward. It took me forty minutes' hard walking to get to Edgware, and it was nearly dark. I made inquiries about the buses that run near the estate, and of course they passed the nearest stop only at the most inconvenient times. If I saved five minutes of that forty I'd be lucky. Then I would have to get a train—they run every five or six minutes to the Strand—and get out of the station, across the road—and you can wait five minutes opposite Charing Cross Station, there—and

go down the Strand as far as the Palace Hotel. An hour and twenty minutes, easily.

I'd have to be up before seven. And if there's one thing I hate worse than getting out of bed it's getting out of bed early.

Helen couldn't believe it. The receipt for five pounds had "Grundy Farm Housing Estate" engraved on it in fancy twining letters, and she had to believe it finally, but it was a long time before she did. She couldn't think where I'd got the five pounds from. I told her I'd stolen it, and that seemed to put her at ease all right. She's got curious old-fashioned ideas about some things, and stealing's one of them, but I think at that she might have been a bit uneasy if I'd tried to get past with a cock and bull yarn about a rise. She didn't mind not knowing where I'd got it from once she felt it was on the level. I guessed she'd rather like not knowing, and I think I'd guessed right.

It was midnight when I started my supper. There was cold meat left from Sunday, made into sandwiches, and some pickles and a piece of cake. There was cocoa instead of tea, because of emptying the tea leaves. I made a good supper, but I left the pickles.

It was nice sitting up late like that, the window half open, and our reflections in it, all dazzled with the reflection of the light. It was a little, awkward room, overloaded with being three rooms in one, and I've damned it a hundred times. But a room you've got to live in day after day, day after day, is a different matter from a room you're going to leave next week.

And Helen was happy in it. I'd not seen her happier for a year. Her joy seemed to come breaking out of her like the sun out of clouds that have hung about for days. It kept bubbling into her voice as she made plans for getting the curtains out of ten shillingsworth of repp she'd seen and liked at Frith's, and making do with floor coverings for only two rooms, so that she kept getting ahead of herself and choking and spluttering and laughing. She took the meat out of one of the sandwiches that was too thick, and cut thinner bread for it, and hunted for a tin of mustard she'd earlier on decided she hadn't got, and she poured half a cup of cocoa away that I'd let get cold and filled it up again for me. And when I'd finished she left the pots unwashed, in the tin basin, when I told her it was too late to start washing up. It was nearly one o'clock when we went to bed.

She got out my shirt and her nightie, that she'd mended on Mrs. Anderton's machine while she'd been out at her mother's, Monday morning, and we both got undressed, me standing on the oilcloth by the door and

Helen at the foot of the bed. She was in bed first, and I got into bed beside her, without switching off the light. We put our arms round each other and lay holding each other very tightly, not even kissing, for so long that I didn't know whether it was a long time or not. And then she kissed my eyebrows and my nose and I took one of her hands and kept on kissing the palm of it. And then I leaned my head on her breasts, my eyes stinging so that I had to keep blinking and I could only see brilliant coloured stars when I opened them. I stayed like that until her breathing began to nod my head evenly and steadily and then, very carefully, I got my arm away that was under her, and crept out of bed and put out the light.

The thing I hate next worst to getting up early is having to take sandwiches to the office for my lunch. Nobody else ever has lunch in the office, so there's no chance of getting tea, and eating sandwiches without a cup of tea is worse than not eating them at all. And that's just what I did for my lunches that week—eat nothing at all.

I didn't really need to act the fool like that. I could have raided the petty cash for two or three shillings, if I'd wanted. I keep the petty cash myself and I could do that easily. I've often done that—I've done it for others in the office, too, when they've been short. I'm not supposed to, of course, but it wouldn't really have mattered, even if by some chance it had been found out before being straightened out on pay-day.

I could have raided the petty cash, all right, but somehow I wouldn't. Not after that eight pounds three. I can't explain why, but I couldn't.

At one o'clock I'd leave the office and go right down to the embankment, where there's no cafés and smells of cooking, and I'd walk by the river—far as Chelsea Bridge, on the one side, or London Bridge on the other. By two o'clock I'd be crazy for something to eat, but in another hour it would be all right again. I'd be pretty washed out, at six o'clock, though. On Friday—I make up the wages Friday morning—I went into the Corner House, and had steak pudding and chips. I think I had a boiled sweet pudding, too, and I had coffee and cheese and biscuits. Two and a penny, it cost me, and I left fourpence for the waiter. And I went in again at tea-time—Helen had come to meet me; we were going to get more furniture. It was nice, then. The band was playing and we had lemonade instead of tea—tall glasses with straws to drink through—and all the men at the tables near by kept looking at Helen.

Helen had eyes for nobody but me, though. She looked at me as though I was something worth looking at. And I felt as though I was something worth looking at then, too. I wished Mr. Gaskell could have seen us, then; a good look at Helen would have made him think twice about me, all right.

There's something about being in town on a summer evening. It's different. You're so used to London as a place to get out of in a hurry that you never notice, ordinarily, that there's something about it. We walked down the Strand, arm in arm, as though the place was our own. It was so nice, just strolling along and talking and squeezing arms, that we never thought about stopping a bus. We'd turned into Aldwych before we knew where we were, and were half way down Kingsway. We got to Holborn at seven, and were pleased as kids we'd walked all the way, like that, too excited with each other to think about getting a bus.

It only took us half an hour to choose the furniture we wanted. They're jolly decent, at the Royal, there; if you were paying cash for everything they couldn't be more polite and helpful; and they're all right when you get behind with your instalments, too. We'd been nervous when we bought our first lot of stuff, a couple of years before, but this time it was different. It was as good as going to the pictures.

With having paid off so much on the old stuff they let me put the balance on the new order and pay off on the one amount. I also arranged for them to move the stuff we'd already got. I reckoned they'd do it fairly cheaply, as they were carrying stuff for us anyway, and we wouldn't have to pay cash down.

Helen thought that was wonderful of me to think of that. She was thrilled about it: simply couldn't get over it. People who saw us walking back down Kingsway that night must have thought we'd been married two weeks rather than two years. That was how we felt about it, too.

The bungalow was a treat for sore eyes when we'd got the stuff in. I got a bargain in some cheap oilcloth from one of our travellers and covered all the floors. We had one decent carpet and Helen's Aunt Sarah, who'd owed us a wedding present so long we'd forgotten all about it, bought us another. We had our old table, covered with green washable American leather, in the kitchen, with a couple of bentwood chairs, and the little sideboard. In the living room we had a settee and two easies, they weren't a suite, they were all different pieces as a matter of fact, but they looked all right and were comfortable too; and we had a new occasional table and the radio cabinet—

we'd finished paying for that, about a month before—and the bookcase Uncle Arthur had given me. There were only about a dozen books in it, two of them dictionaries, but Helen had got a nice big fruit bowl on top of it. Everywhere looked so nice that I only put two of our pictures up: the two bowls of flowers on a black ground we'd got as a supplement or something to one of those Happy Home sort of magazines. They went well with the modern decorations.

The bedroom was at the back. We'd plunged on the bedroom. Before, at Andertons, we'd only had a bed and a dressing table, but now we'd got a wardrobe and a tallboy too. When we'd finished with that bedroom it looked good. You could lie in bed and watch half of Middlesex sloping up beyond the back of the garden. You could go to bed with the light on and no curtains drawn if you liked, without having to stand away from the window—there wasn't anything beyond that window but the garden and river and fields. And it looked so nice and clean and airy, that bedroom, with the peach-coloured paper, with a narrow border of black and gold, and the whitest ceiling you ever saw. We loved that bedroom.

V

"What's-the-Names," said Nolan, the manager, standing at the office door. "The people we used to buy blankets from, the people being wound up. I see they're sending out for proofs of debt. We'd no contra accounts or debit balances outstanding or anything, had we?"

I wondered if he could hear my heart beating. "No," I said, wondering if I should have made a better show of looking up the exact position. "No."

"Good," he said, as though faintly surprised that anybody he disliked as much as he seemed to have disliked me this past fortnight, could have failed to make a mess of something. "Good. No outstanding amounts at all?"

"No," I said again, and he nodded and closed the door after him. I closed my eyes and counted ten, and when I opened them he was standing in the doorway again.

"Rebates," he said. "Did we get the rebates through on our last purchases?"

I swallowed the saliva in my mouth. "Yes," I said, too promptly if anything. That was the one transaction I didn't want to have to turn up. He stood there for a minute, just saying nothing and looking at me. Suppose he asked me how much? Dare I tell him without making a show of turning up the cash book? Dare I risk making a show of turning up the cash book? He might meander round to my side of the desk, as he does so often, and look at the figures. I looked not at Nolan but at the open door; his hand was on it and it told me what he was going to do. And then I heard something.

"Your bell," I said. I've got sharp ears. "Mr. Gaskell's ringing for you."

He started—he's more frightened of Mr. Gaskell than I am—after all, he gets eight pounds a week to my three. "For me? Oh!" He was out of the office like a shot.

I didn't get into a panic. Lots of people would have written that eight pounds three shillings up in the cash book so fast they'd have put blots all over the page. But not me. It would have to go in, now Nolan had just chanced to think of it, like that—he'd remember it for sure when he came to do the rebates—but it was hardly likely he'd bother about it again before then. And on the other hand I have to balance my bank every week, and if I

put the eight pounds three in it certainly wouldn't balance, unless I could pay the money into the bank, which of course I couldn't. As a matter of fact, I'd been hoping for the opportunity of getting another pound or two, never mind putting some back. This needed thinking about.

I thought about it to some considerable extent. I wondered what Mr. Gaskell would have done. Something pretty bright and swindling, I'll bet. Perhaps, in my position, though, he'd never even have started anything. It needs guts to start something like this, in my position. Any fool can swindle in thousands—it's doubtful if you'll go to jail even if you're caught. But swindling in odd pounds takes some doing. There's not many people can do it and get away with it. They'd get in a panic over a stroke of bad luck like Mr. Nolan happening to think of that rebate. But me, I hadn't got into a panic. I'd got a pretty good scheme for getting out of it, right enough, and of getting that other pound or two in the bargain! But I wasn't doing anything I hadn't properly thought out. I thought it out the rest of the day, and slept on it. And it was all in order when I thought about it next day.

These purchases, that we get the rebates on, they're made by three buyers we've got. These three buyers buy everything for cash, and all that goes in our official books are the amounts they draw: ten, twelve, or fifteen pounds, usually: round figures, as they're drawn in advance. The particulars of these purchases don't go in our books. I know why they don't go in our books, though I'm not supposed to, but anyway they don't. They only go in the buying books—little notebooks, really, that Mr. Gaskell keeps to himself. So that my cash book shows a lot of sums of ten and twelve and fifteen pounds in the names of one or other of these three travellers. It's a good chance that one more sum of fifteen pounds, that nobody has really had, is going to pass unnoticed for a considerable time, certainly until the auditors make their abstracts of totals and compare them. And that's a long time off: I can take care of that difficulty when it comes.

So what I do is this. I put on the credit side of the cash book: Buyers Cash: £15. And I put on the debit: Purchase rebate: £8 3*s*. 0*d*. And I pocket the difference: £6 17*s*. 0*d*.

Now to anybody who doesn't know anything about book-keeping and how business firms are run this might sound too easy to be true, or too risky. But it's nothing of the sort, really. There isn't a business firm in this city, I don't suppose, that could not be robbed as easily and methodically. There are hundreds of complicated entries in books of account, and work would never get done if it all had to be checked systematically every day or week or even month. It's usually left until the auditors come, at the end of the year

—and reasonably, too: a man's a fool who's going to take money when the auditors will find him out so soon, and employers pride themselves on not employing fools. But me, I'd got ideas about the auditors, and I wasn't worrying about them.

And I wasn't worrying about this fifteen pounds, either. It was a hundred to one on my getting away with it. It had been a hundred to one on my getting away with it when it was eight pounds three, but the odd chance had turned up. So the odds against the odd chance turning up again were even more than a hundred to one now.

Helen couldn't make it out at all. Here she was, worrying about the milk bill, and the insurance policy three days off lapsing, and the shoes at the mender's she'd not been able to get back, and the first payment to the building society, and the bill for the removal—the Royal only charged us ten shillings: that's what I call reasonable—and the wringing machine she must have if she was to get her washing done, and the extra deposit for the electricity, and all an ordinary week's expenses to find out of one week's wages. And here was I, home from the office for the week-end in a good humour that made her worries vanish into the background, and enough money to keep them there. And, of all things in the world, a present of undies that made her eyes like saucers.

I don't know why I'd kept them from her so long. But now seemed just the right time to give them her. She'd given up wondering where I'd got the money from—she had an idea, I think, that I'd given up clerking for the buying end of it. Buying for our business is risky, and when I'd thought of asking Nolan for a change, a year back, she'd been against it. I suppose she thought I'd made the change, was doing well, and wasn't going to tell her until I was properly settled.

I'd just finished my dinner—it was about two o'clock. Helen had just settled down to a cup of tea with me—she'd had her meal earlier, so's she could properly look after mine: see I got everything piping hot and just when I was ready for it, I suppose. She was wearing one of those print aprons from Selfridge's that fasten without strings or anything—those things that just clip round the body. It was a brightly coloured thing that suited her fine, and I told her so.

"You look swell," I said. "That apron. It suits you. You could wear it on Sunday and be one up on most girls." She got hold of my hand. "You are a

loonie," she said, looking at me as though a loonie was some sort of god, "but I wish I could. That's the worst of summer. You need such nice things."

"Nice things," I said, "that's good. What about that thing with the cape collar, and the one with the red thingummies all over it?"

She smiled. "And underneath," she said, "I'm worse still."

"Underneath," I said, "you're perfect." I stood up and pulled her up, too. "Come on," I said, "we'll see."

"Let me clear the table," she said, not understanding, "first. And lock the door. All the tradesmen round here call on a Saturday afternoon." I turned the key in the lock of the outside kitchen door, still holding her hand. "Never mind the table," I said, and with my free hand drew the curtains together. The nosiest tradesman couldn't see the table then. I picked her up and carried her into the bedroom, and she pretended to struggle, laughing and kicking.

She was thrilled beyond words. I stood her in front of the dressing table, and arranged the side-mirrors so that there were three separate Helens in them. Then I took off the apron, and threw it over the end of the bed, and she held up her arms whilst I slipped off the blue check cotton dress she was wearing. I kissed her bare shoulders and slid off the one shoulder strap that had not fallen and the step-ins or whatever they are called dropped in a neat ring round her feet, a pale blue wreath. Her vest wasn't blue. It was white, and darned in two or three places, and she lifted up her arms again whilst I took it off. She had no stockings on, and she stood there in nothing but her high-heeled shoes, and the way she looked at me very nearly made me forget the present I'd bought for her.

She was thrilled all right. I dressed her in everything, and what with the kissing and loving we were all of two hours. And in the end I liked best a set of white things, and I put these on for her, and some stockings, and the dress with the red thingummies; and then I cleaned her best black shoes and put them on for her, and carried her back to the kitchen as though she was so much precious porcelain. And then I unlocked the door and cleared the table and washed the pots and made tea. And it was the first time I've ever done that and liked it.

There was shopping to do after tea. Tradesmen of all kinds come round the estate but all we wanted to pay for was the stuff we bought. Helen put on

her light summer coat and the daft little hat with two points on, rather like the hats you sometimes see air-force men in, that suits her so well, and we went into Edgware.

It was a lovely evening, the sun still shining, but not so hot, and we didn't bother about the bus. We were in Edgware in no time, and soon looking round at the cheap shops; that is, not the shops that sell stuff cheap but the shops that sell good stuff at a moderate price.

We bought one or two things and then I said: "If we're going to the pictures you'll have to look slippy. It's twenty to eight." I like gangster films. But Helen didn't seem keen on the pictures, although we used to go almost every Saturday night, winter and summer.

"Mrs. Schoolteacher's-Wife, opposite, says Burnt Oak's a good place for shopping on a Saturday night. Let's go."

"It's the next stop on the train," I said. "Or we can take a tram here."

"Let's walk. It's nice walking." So I took the paper carrier off her and she slipped her arm through mine and we walked down the Edgware Road. She walked half turned towards me, looking up at me, like she used to do when we were courting. Like, my cousin Ethel used to say, she was frightened of me getting away. Cousin Ethel had always been the one with the looks in our family, till Helen had come along.

We were soon in Burnt Oak. Burnt Oak is a good place for shopping. That road that leads down to the station: it's crowded on a Saturday night. All the shops have shows outside, and there are stalls all over the pavements and barrows in the roadway. We got half a shoulder of lamb for one and eightpence, and it looked really nice. And we got a cauliflower for threepence that would have been double elsewhere. "Next summer," I said, "It'll be nothing." And I suddenly wondered if it would. We joined hands a minute—and that wasn't easy in the crowd that pushed past the stalls—and Helen looked up at me in that sideways manner like you always see on the pictures. We got a bundle of rhubarb for fourpence and some cooking apples at twopence a pound. And we got three tins of fruit from a cut-price shop.

"This is better than the pictures, any day," said Helen, squeezing my hand as I took a second carrier from her.

"Any night, you mean." It was, too. With all the lights flaring into the slight dusk and making it seem almost as though it was getting properly dark, and the tradesmen shouting, and pedlars shouting even louder from the

kerbstones, and dance-band music coming from the loudspeaker of the wireless shop. It was better than lots better things than the pictures.

Just before everything began to close down the confectioner's shop near the station started to sell off their fancy cakes, cheap, and we got eight three-ha'penny ones for ninepence. It really was beginning to get dark when we managed to get a tram into Edgware.

When we got off the tram we re-arranged the things in the three carriers, so that Helen could carry one light one, and then we went to the bus stop. We just missed one, and there was twenty minutes to wait for another.

"Never mind the bus," I said, "let's walk." It was a lovely night. Cool and fresh, and somehow like Helen when she's got something new on.

"Right," she said. "Right! Coo, and I know!" We were right outside a fish and chip shop. It smelt good to me, and I said so. I put the carriers on the ground a bit and rubbed my hands, where the string had cut, until she was served. She put the bag of chips, open, in the top of her carrier—there was nothing in that which would take harm, and we walked home eating them. She had salted and vinegared them in the shop, and they were good. Right then my idea of heaven was to walk down a quiet dark country road, with Helen, eating chips and carrying a couple of carriers with the week-end eats in them.

"I love you," she said, "so that it gets me frightened there mightn't be any things left I can do for you that I don't like doing." She sighed and put two chips in my mouth—I'd got heavy carriers in both my hands.

"You've got to sort of get used to marriage," I said. "It's rotten at first."

"Not rotten. Funny. You don't know what to think. Or you think there's nothing more to think about."

"I love you," I said. "I love you. This afternoon was nothing," I said. "I love you so." I felt her blushing, and she put a hand over my mouth. It smelt of vinegar. I managed to bite it, soon, and she laughed and took it away. "I'll buy you a car," I said. "And a fur coat."

She laughed. "Phew. I feel more like having a bathing dress than a fur coat."

"And two bathing dresses," I said. We stopped while she kissed me. I didn't put the carriers down. I just stood with them and she put her arms round my neck and lifted her feet off the ground, and we kept on kissing

each other. She stood on her own feet and blew a great sigh. "You're so strong. I ought to be frightened of you. I am frightened of you."

"You need be," I said.

"I thought you were going to buy me a car."

"And a fur coat. And a bathing dress. Two." We walked on a long way in silence. We had passed the estate office before we spoke again.

"You got me a house," she said. "A home. That's better than everything else. I want nice clothes. I'd like a car. But I never want to be without a home. You feel—you feel—somebody, somehow. I can't explain, but I've never felt really married before."

"You never have been really married before. Here we are. Don't let the gate swing back on these parcels. That's right. Now, the key's in my right hand trousers pocket. You'll have to feel for it. And don't tickle."

I wakened up feeling that life was good. One window was opened and a curtain curved inside the room, trembling in the sunshine. Outside the birds were singing like mad, and a dog was barking. Inside the alarm clock ticked in a very solemn reliable kind of way on top of the tallboy, and I looked at it twice, It was eleven o'clock. Eleven o'clock!

I remembered, now, that I'd every reason to feel that life was good. No wonder it was eleven o'clock—we hadn't gone to sleep till three. I'd remembered looking at the clock, half drugged with fatigue, and thinking that I mustn't go to sleep without getting up and putting out the light. And I looked up expecting to see the faint yellow gleam that an electric bulb has when it's lit in daytime, but this electric bulb hadn't. It was only then I realized that Helen wasn't in bed with me, and I lifted my self up on one elbow and looked round, and there she was framed in the open doorway, all spruced up and in her print apron, and a great loaded tray in front of her with steam lazily curling up to her face.

"I can't feed in bed!" I said, shocked, and wondered why I couldn't, except that I never had done before. But Helen didn't know that; she put the tray down and brought me a towel from the bathroom: she had dipped one end in warm water and rubbed it with soap, we hadn't got a sponge or a flannel, yet. I felt a lot better, then. She put the pillow from her side on top of mine and bunched them against the top of the bed, so that I could sit up comfortably. Then she took the pot of coffee off the tray, because of the weight, and put it on the floor; and I sat with the tray across my knees. There

was egg and bacon and toast, some tinned grapefruit in a fruit dish, and marmalade and bread and butter.

Helen peppered and salted my egg, and sugared my coffee, pouring extra hot milk to it. She sat on the side of the bed—I had to lift one leg slightly so she didn't tilt the tray too much—and watched every bite and drink I took as though it was a matter of life and death. She cut the toast into strips and kept giving them to me, just as I was ready for them. You'd have thought by the way she'd planned that breakfast, and thought about it, and helped me eat it, that my breakfast was the most important thing in the world. She'd had hers. She'd been up at nine o'clock, she said.

When I'd finished she brought me the towel again, and I rubbed my hands and gave it her back. She rubbed the corner of my mouth with it.

"Egg," she said. She rubbed her hand over my chin. "My! How your whiskers grow!" And then she flung her arms round me and kissed me, pressing her face against mine and rubbing it so that my whiskers must have hurt her. "I do love you!" she muttered, in a choking voice. "God! I do love you! Aren't you shamed of me?" She drew away, hanging her head down and nervously fingering the top of my vest—I still hadn't got a pyjama coat, but I didn't want one this weather.

"Shamed of you!" I said. I didn't want her to think that. That would spoil everything. By Jove! I didn't want her to think that! I tumbled her on the bed and fondled her. I said all manner of things that came into my head, trying to make her see how much more I loved her than I'd ever done before. I made her see that all right.

She lay on her back, beside me, staring up at the ceiling.

"I hope I have a baby now," she whispered, getting hold of my hand and twining her fingers through mine.

"A baby!" I was startled. "But you can't have a baby, now. Not after . . . not after that other time."

We lay silent a few minutes. But I was thinking pretty fast. So, I guess, was she.

"You never know," she said. "I might."

She might, too, by God, I thought, as I dug in the growing vegetable patch at the bottom of the garden. She certainly might. The more I thought about last night the more I realized that she certainly might.

I stepped down into the trench and cleared the loose soil from the bottom. Then I sprinkled flaked naphtha along the bottom and shovelled it back again. The soil was heavy and there were wire-worms, so I'd done that with all the ground I'd cleared so far. Made a proper job of it, not just turned it over, but double-trench dug the whole area, throwing up the soil into about a dozen drills. I'd sown peas, beans—dwarfs and scarlets—carrots, cabbage, beetroot, turnips, spinach, lettuce, radishes and onions. I'd bought a dozen tomato plants, too, for threepence ha'penny each. I was sorry I was too late for potatoes. Potatoes would have broken up the soil fine.

You couldn't rely too much on what doctors said. And anyway he'd only said she'd probably not have children again. He hadn't been sure. That was fourteen months before, and I'd got into the habit now of thinking she wouldn't have. She'd been fourteen months without, but that had been different. She wouldn't be fourteen months without now, nor yet fourteen days, maybe.

I chucked the last of the soil back and began a fresh trench. I didn't feel quite so good now. Just Helen and me, that was all right. We were both having a good time, and if the worst came to the worst we could pay for it. We were grown up. But a baby. . . .

She mustn't have a baby. If you acted promptly you could always mend that, and it wasn't dangerous, if you really did act promptly. She mustn't have a baby.

I stepped into the trench and cleared the loose soil away. This was good, digging like this, in your own garden, getting your own vegetables for your own wife to cook for your own table. This was good. I sprinkled the naphtha along the bottom. It added another smell to all the country smells that hang about the bottom of that garden, the smells that mix with the chirping of the birds and grasshoppers, the barking of dogs, the sound of a lawnmower, a horse in the shafts of a milk cart, the faint crying of a baby, the shouting of small boys, the leaves in the trees, the snap of dried twigs in the sun, the sound of Helen messing about with pots and pans through the open scullery window, the sunlight through the trees and glinting across the water, the ringing of church bells.

I still felt a bit uneasy.

At the front there was a small patch of quite flat ground. By digging very deep borders round all four sides and keeping the coarse field grass cropped short it looked quite respectable. It would be all right until I could lay a

proper lawn, anyway. After tea I planted out the Canterbury Bells and Sweet Williams I'd sown in a little bed when we'd first come in. They were quite sturdy little plants and I dibbled them carefully into rows I'd marked out with two pegs and a piece of string. I didn't want to lose any of them. If I lost a single plant it would spoil the whole show for me. Still, Helen would like them; and it was Helen I was doing this front garden for. Myself I'm not particularly keen about flowers. They're all right, of course, but not half such fun as vegetables. I can't understand anybody bothering about with roses if they've ever watched cabbages grow. You nurse a savoy from a planted out seedling to a great hard heart without a hole or a blemish, and you'll never look at a rose again. That's how I feel about it, anyway.

I'd got Snapdragons in the front borders, too, and some Geranium cuttings old Parker at the office had given me; and I made sowings of Anemones and Catmint. That front garden was going to look a queer mixture in a few weeks' time, but we'd come in too late to do anything very much with it. Helen would like it, anyway.

Usually I worked in the garden until about ten, but tonight I packed up at eight. I cleaned my spade and boots and put them in the shed I'd built at the back, mostly out of the floorboards that were lying about all over the place to be taken for the picking up. I'd rebated and moulded them and nailed them to four inch square posts sunk a good three feet into the ground, and I'd nailed bitumen felting over the roof, so that when I'd finished with it the thing was properly weatherproof. I'd divided it into two sections, for coal and for tools, and I'd painted it all over with lead paint and a nice finishing green, to go with the woodwork of the bungalow. It looked grand.

When I'd put all my tools away and changed my clothes I thought I'd have a bath, and Helen ran me a bathful of water—we'd had a fire all day because of the cooking, and the water was lovely and hot. Helen warmed two towels for me, and when I called she brought them in to me, and my clean vest, too. That, I thought, was my idea of a day well spent: a spell of hard outdoor work and then a bath to finish it off with. And then I had that feeling of uneasiness again and remembered why I'd come in from the garden so early.

"Dear Sir," I wrote, "I wish to apply for the vacancy advertised in today's *Daily Telegraph*." Yes, that was all right. I'd put Saturday's date at the top. But it wasn't all right, surely. Apply for the vacancy. That didn't sound right, somehow. You apply for a position, not a vacancy. A vacancy is the nothing that's there between the other fellow leaving and you getting his job. "I wish to apply for the position of assistant manager advertised in

today's *Daily Telegraph*." Or, the current issue of the *Daily Telegraph*? Too long-winded. "I am twenty-seven years old." I'm not, but I could pass for twenty-seven. Of age, perhaps, would sound better than just old. No use putting two words instead of one, though. "And have had five years' experience in the office of a well-known London firm," well-known, anyway, to people who buy goods mail-order on easy payments, "for three of which I have acted in the capacity of assistant to the manager." That's all right. You see I don't actually say that I'm assistant manager, but I give that impression. "In the absence of the manager and managing director I am in sole charge of an office staff of eleven persons." I suppose I am, too, if ever Mr. Gaskell and Mr. Nolan are both out together. Eleven persons. That was all right if I included the charwoman and the messenger boy, and added one for good luck. "I am thoroughly experienced in all branches of office routine." That's not so good, but it's the beginning of the sentence; it'll pass muster with a better ending "and a good disciplinarian." That's true enough. At least it would be if I had a position of authority. "I am keen, energetic, able and adaptable." Good God! Did you ever see such tripe? Keen, energetic, able and adaptable. Better go and see the fellow and take your clothes off. For a minute or two I've a good mind to tear it up, but I know I've got to get a better job, somehow or other. I must have five pounds a week to live here, and if I don't get another job I'll be taking money just as I need it, before I know where I am. "And can supply excellent references testifying both to integrity and ability. Trusting my application is of sufficient interest to merit the privilege of a personal interview." What the devil do I mean, personal interview? Is there such a thing as an impersonal interview? "the privilege of an interview, I am, yours respectfully." No, dammit, I won't be respectful to some fat old devil I've never seen. "Yours faithfully."

I post the letter on my way to work, Monday morning. That makes me feel a bit better. I don't suppose I'll get a reply to it, but if I keep on pegging away I'll get something sooner or later, so I feel a bit better.

But at that I don't feel good as I did. I can take whatever's coming to me; and I'm not worried about Helen. It'd be a shock to her if anything happened to me, sure enough, but she's young, handsome, and got old-fashioned ideas about right and wrong. I figured out that she'd probably want to be separated, perhaps get a divorce when she met somebody she wanted to marry again, some chap with a really good job that could give her proper clothes and all the things a girl of her style should have. It'd be rotten

for her, of course, but the best thing in the long run: wife of a three-pound-a-week clerk is no sort of a life for a girl like Helen. And no sort of a life for me, either.

This life we've been leading since we went to Edgware, that is good. That is worth the risk I'm taking, worth it to both of us. Perhaps I won't be found out. Perhaps I'll get a job that'll really pay me five pounds a week. That will certainly be good.

But perhaps I won't get a job that'll really pay me five pounds a week. Perhaps I will get found out. And perhaps Helen will find herself with a baby on the way. That is not so good, and I'm still uneasy about it.

I posted the letter in one of the boxes in the Strand and walked on to the office. I felt funny in my stomach about walking on to the office. I've often felt fed up, especially on a Monday morning, about the office, but this was different. I wondered what it would be like if Mr. Gaskell sent for me and asked me to explain about those cash purchases. I knew perfectly well that Mr. Gaskell would not send for me and ask me to explain those cash purchases, but I wondered what it would be like just the same. I got a sudden idea to have the day off; pretend, next morning, I'd been ill. It was such a lovely morning. The Strand was like a sun trap, and all the glass of the windows and the buses were shining and sparkling. Lots of men were in flannel bags and sports coats; I'd got my ordinary jacket and trousers on, no waistcoat, of course, but I felt out of it, somehow. There were crowds of sightseers about, already, some of them obviously Colonials. If I ever really was found out, I thought, I'd go abroad when I came out of prison. Make a fresh start in life, on a farm or a ranch or somewhere: certainly not in an office.

I stopped at the corner of the side street where the entrance to our place is. I just couldn't go in, somehow. Above the noise of the people and the traffic I could hear the hooting of ships on the river, going down to Richmond, perhaps. I could jump on any of these buses going west, and then change to the Green Line or the Undergrounds and go to Richmond, or Hampstead Heath, or Putney Common, or Burnham Beeches. I could go to Epping Forest. I'd not been in Epping Forest since I was about twelve. Or I could go home—easily make an excuse to Helen.

"You'll have the police keeping an eye on you," said a voice I didn't recognize until I saw old Parker grinning up at me from behind his great blinking glasses. "Loitering about like this."

We walked down the street together, and I followed him up the stairs, telling him how I'd planted the Geranium cuttings. He's a nice old chap. Potters about the place making himself useful, doing all the things everybody else is too busy to do. He can make better afternoon tea than any office girl we've ever had.

We were the last in—it was ten past nine. Three of the four typewriters in the General Office were already rattling away like fun, and the other one—Peterson's, the pimply-faced correspondence clerk's—was evidently being overhauled. The office boy was putting fresh blotting paper in the pads and Miss Fitzroy, the new office girl, was altering all the date stamps. Everybody was talking at once, and damnably cheerful. You'd have thought coming to work on a Monday morning was pleasure, to have heard the way that lot were carrying on. All the windows were wide open and the sun and noise of traffic out in the Strand poured into the room, and altogether you couldn't hear yourself think.

I was glad to open the door of the room we call Accounts Office, and shut the door on the row in the other place. I threw my hat on the peg behind the door, fished my keys out and opened my desk and the old safe where the books are kept. Miss Nixon and young Potter were working away at the tall sloping desk. Miss Nixon was standing beside the tall stool with the stuffing hanging out of the gaps in the American leather—sure sign that she was busy. She was having her holidays the end of the week and trying to get her work up to date, I suppose. Young Potter was sat on his stool; he's a lazy young devil if ever there was one—I've told him off many a time for sitting on the edge of my desk when he's talking to me. That lad will have piles something awful before he's much older.

They were both very quiet and I remembered, now, that they'd been quarrelling Saturday morning. They're both seventeen, and Potter can't understand that a girl of seventeen is twice as old as a boy of seventeen, and it gets his goat the way Miss Nixon puts on what he calls "airs." She does put on airs, too, but she's all right really. I like her. She's sweet on me, I think.

I was glad they were quiet and getting on with their work, because I couldn't get on with mine anyway. I was sorry old Parker had seen me, like that. I could have had the day off easily—I've only ever had two days off in five years. I've never been ill in my life, and only ever seen a doctor when I've been kicked or something playing football.

The harder I tried the less I could work. Mr. Nolan will be in now, I thought, at half-past nine; and at ten o'clock I thought: and now Mr. Gaskell's in. And then Miss Nixon went into the other office for something and I could tell by the way the machines were going and the telephone being answered that Mr. Gaskell was in. I had to see Mr. Nolan about something very soon, and walked across to his office. Peterson jerked his head across to the front office, as soon as he saw my hand on Nolan's door, so I went back again. No use waiting for him, if he was in with Mr. Gaskell. He might be in there for hours.

But he wasn't. In a couple of minutes he was at the door of our little room. He glared at me a minute—he looked a bit flushed I thought; usually he looks sort of grey.

"Where's your cash book?" he said. He came over to my desk, and I just sat there, with my stomach rolling over and over. "Cash book. Cash purchases. List. Beginning of year. Ah! Here it is." It was opened out in front of me, but I couldn't do a thing about it. He turned over the pages. "Cash purchases," he said. "Where's the names of the buyers? Don't you put names of the buyers? You should put names of buyers. These are amounts on account, aren't they? Ten, twelve, fifteen, fifteen, twelve. Make a list of them. From the beginning of the year. Hurry up, Mr. Gaskell's waiting. Where're you going?"

He looks at me suspiciously as I get up from the desk.

"Columned foolscap," I say. "It's in the other office."

"Never mind that." He looks at me. "You stay here. Do it on any sort of paper. But hurry up." He bangs the door after him and opens it again. "Mr. Gaskell's office," he says, and disappears again.

I can't write at first. I can't think. I'm not easily scared—you don't have to be, if you're pinching the firm's money, because every transaction or type of transaction that happens is asked about half a dozen times in quite ordinary and innocent sorts of ways, and if you were easily scared you'd think it was because you'd been found out. But this wasn't an ordinary and innocent sort of way. Nolan was excited, you could see that. Something was wrong, you could see that with half an eye. I was scared. I certainly was scared. I managed to get some sort of grip on myself, soon, and was surprised to find that I'd nearly finished the list of figures. I'd been doing them mechanically, but when I checked up on them I found they were right. I'd included the fifteen pounds nobody had really had, too, except me. It was

no good leaving it out. If Mr. Gaskell really did suspect me he'd have the list properly checked in a few minutes.

There were about a hundred items, and they totalled twelve hundred odd pounds. As soon as I'd made the cast and checked it I took it to Mr. Gaskell's office. I must have walked there in a dream. I found myself standing outside his door. I could hear him shouting inside. I knocked once or twice and got no answer, so I opened the door and peeped in.

Mr. Gaskell was pacing up and down the room with a great fat cigar stuck angrily in his red face. Nolan was standing meekly by his desk saying, "Yes, sir," and "No, sir," in every pause. Mr. Gaskell saw me first.

"Come in, damn you," he said, "come in. That the list?" He snatched it out of my hand and gave a quick glance at it. "Great God!" he shouted, stamping his feet and waving his cigar so that the ash fell all over his shoulders. "And this is the man who has the bloody nerve to ask me for an advance. I like your cheek, sir, damn you, I like your cheek!" He coughed and swallowed, and flung his cigar into the empty fire grate. "You're a great help to me, by God! A great help. D'you think I'm going to be robbed hand over fist and let people get away with it? Do you, damn you, do you? What the hell's the good of a list like that to me? What does it tell me? Nothing, you fool, nothing. I want names. Names. I want to know how much each buyer has had. Don't stand there like a graven image. Can't you understand? Minshull's been twisting me. He's been taking my money. I want to know how much. He doesn't know, or says he doesn't know. I don't know. You're the man who's supposed to know. I ask you, and what do I get? What do I get!" He waved the sheet of paper in my face, and then crumpled it up and threw it in the waste paper basket. "That's what I get. A meaningless list of figures. What d'you call yourself? I thought you were supposed to be smart. If you are tell me how I can find out what I want to know from that blasted sheet of paper?"

When I get back into the little office I'm covered with sweat. My shirt is sticking to my back, and when I sit down my trousers stick, too. My hands are trembling so that I can't hold a pen, and I've to keep wiping them with my handkerchief.

But I'm thinking again, now. My mind is like ice. I know what I'm going to do now. He's told me too much. Minshull doesn't know how much money he's taken, doesn't he? Then my fifteen pounds can go on the amounts he's

had. That's one of the amounts he doesn't know about. And if he says he's not had it nobody will believe him.

Thought I was supposed to be smart, did he, the fat swine? Well, he's right. I am. I'm too smart for him, anyway. I'm smart all right. I've got fifteen pounds of his he'll never find. I can stand to be cursed, when I'm getting away with that.

But I can't stand to be cursed.

A fool, am I? A graven image. Supposed to be smart.

I don't want any lunch. I walk down to the embankment gardens; sit on a form by the old water gate, and smoke.

But smoking's no good. I throw my cigarette, half smoked, away, and a bundle of rags that I thought had been put on the form by a tramp of a woman suddenly becomes possessed of hands and legs and picks it up off the ground. I watch my cigarette jut out from a jungle of whiskers and I think. All right, but that fellow hasn't to stand up in an office and be cursed by a little fat swine he could break in two.

I left the gardens and crossed over to the embankment and leaned on the stone parapet and stared at the river. The tide was up and the water thick with boats. A trippers' boat was making for the Pool. I could see the guide with the megaphone at his mouth, and the passengers, their heads swinging first at the brewery lion, then across to me—Bush House, I suppose they'd be looking at then—then back to the tower at the lead and shot works. Most of those people, I supposed, were on holiday from the provinces, people like me who worked and were cursed for fifty weeks in the year to have freedom for two.

Not that I was cursed like that every week, of course; but the feeling was always there, every day. He could be all right for a couple of months, but the trouble was you didn't know that couple of months that he was going to be, and every day you felt might be the day you were going to get cursed.

And then I thought about the reply to the advertisement. If I got a job now I would be all right; I wouldn't have to worry about that fifteen pounds ever being found out—not if something unexpected didn't happen about Minshull.

They took Minshull to Bow Street, and he was charged with embezzling various sums amounting to a hundred and forty pounds. He made a

statement admitting everything, and pleaded guilty at his trial. He got six months. It was a relief to me, all right, when it was all over.

VI

"Darling," says Helen, shading the light from her eyes with one hand and looking at me sideways. "I want you to let me do something I want to do very much."

It is one of those sweltering nights of the late August heat wave. It is nearly midnight, but we are lying in bed still wide awake. We are lying on the bed, rather, with the clothes over the foot of the bed, so we can pull them up when we waken up in the early morning and find it has at last gone quite cold. We have got nothing on, because it is still so hot, and it is grand to lie there with nothing on when you've walked about town with the shirt sticking to your back. That is why we still have the light on, because we have nothing on. I like to see Helen with nothing on. I like to see her eyebrows, that get neater and higher at the corners every day, and I like particularly to see all the tight little curls in the back of her blonde head. They're nice curls, although they're not natural. At least, they're natural in the sense that if you've paid a hairdresser a guinea for a permanent wave then it's natural to have nice curls. I can lie and look at her hair, when she's nothing on, by the hour. It's more exciting when she's nothing on, somehow.

"Mrs. Gullet," she says, after a bit, when I don't speak, "wants me to go to Herne Bay with her for the week-end. Her people live there, so it wouldn't cost anything. Week after next, she's going."

"That's the schoolteacher's wife, isn't it? You seem to be getting pretty thick."

"He's not a schoolteacher. He's a schoolmaster. They're the sort of people we ought to get friendly with. Maude—Mrs. Gullet—she's very clever, too. She's been to a public school."

That sounds pretty bogy, to me. Women don't go to public schools, do they? But I let it pass. It wouldn't cost anything, she says; but I've not been married two years for nothing.

"I don't know," I say, "I'll think it over."

"Think it over!" Helen sits up in bed and looks at me so that the light isn't in her eyes. "You know, you're getting awful," she says. "It's getting so I've got to ask you about every little thing I want to do. Maude—Mrs. Gullet

—she was ever so surprised when I said you mightn't let me." She's quite angry. Her lower lip's pouting out and there's more colour in her cheeks than there was when she had her face in front of the mirror. I always thought when people flushed the colour rose up into their faces, but it didn't then, with Helen. It came down her neck and over her shoulders and crept along her breasts. But perhaps I imagined it, because the light's to the back of her, so that the front of her is in a slight shadow.

"You just lie there," she says, putting her hand over her heart, "like a—a —a great bear." She hasn't sworn for months, now. "It's not good enough," she says; "it's not good enough."

"But you like it not being good enough," I say, and try to pull her down. But she's having none of that. "Gullet's probably glad when his wife goes to Herne Bay," I say. "I don't suppose he's jealous." But she's having none of that, either. She just sits upright with her hand over her heart, breathing heavily.

And then I make a bad slip. "How much will it really cost you?" I say, and could bite my tongue off right away.

"I knew you'd let me go!" she whoops, and bites my nose and grabs a handful of the hair on my chest and tugs like mad. "You're a duck. I reckon I can manage with two pounds nicely. There's my fare. There's a tip for the maid when I leave—how much would you think? I don't know, either. I want one of those great linen hats—they're only half-a-crown—and a pair of shoes. I'll have to have a pair of shoes, anyway, because my court shoes won't repair again, and I can't wear sandals much longer, so we shouldn't really count those, should we? I'll have to have another frock, whatever happens. I've worn that pink figured one till I could scream at the sight of it. I should think Mrs. Gullet could, too. But if I buy one of those artificial silk ones—those flowered ones—it would do for an afternoon frock during the winter, too. They're only about seven and six, now. Oh—and gloves. Those frilly organdie cuffs. One and elevenpence they are now. That's all." She pauses a minute. "Except a nightie."

"A nightie?" I look up at that. "You've got about half-a-dozen nighties. . . ." And then I see what she means. "You shouldn't worry about that," I growl at her. "Show her you're a good needlewoman and I'm a good husband."

Helen peals with laughter at that, and grabs a handful of hair again. And then she sees why I'm fed up about it. "Darling," she says, and her hand creeps up to my chin and she strokes my face. "You're hard up," she says.

"Of course I am," I say. I'm not going to blunder again. "Of course I am."

"No. You know what I mean. You can't let me have the two pounds?"

I take a deep breath. "I'm saving up," I tell her.

"Saving up?" she says, her eyes are like saucers. You'd think I'd given her a fortune. "You darling," she whispers, and strokes and kisses my face, "you darling." Pretty soon she's lying on me and my arms are round her. "My own. My husband," she whispers. "I won't go to Herne Bay. I don't want to go to Herne Bay when you tell me not to."

We kiss a good deal, and caress each other. And then, right from nowhere, like a kick in the pants, it occurs to me why she thinks I'm saving up. It's her birthday the tenth of September.

All I've saved up is eight shillings towards a pair of football boots. I'm going to play soccer again this season, I think. I used to be pretty good. I've not played for two seasons, but I'm still only twenty-four, and perhaps if I put my back into it I'll get in with one of the junior professional teams, or one of the sham amateurs. You can get thirty shillings a week with some of the amateur teams, I'm told, and, better still, a good job if you're lucky.

But I'll use that eight shillings for a present. I'll stop smoking for a fortnight, too. I'll do without lunches. Or at least I'll just have a cup of tea and a roll and butter at Lyons'; that'll save eightpence a day. And I'll come down to the office on a workman ticket. Half-past seven is the latest for a workman ticket. That means leaving home at ten to seven, and that means getting up at six o'clock. Six o'clock! But I'll do it. If I do it for a fortnight I'll have saved, let me see, nineteen and fourpence. Nineteen and fourpence and eight shillings is twenty-seven and fourpence. That isn't so good. And that isn't the whole of the story, either. By the tenth of September there'll be second instalments owing on both the house and the furniture. I've two wage days before the tenth, which is a Sunday, and at the outside I can't take more than fifteen shillings from each week. Thirty shillings won't settle the overdue instalments, never mind the due instalments.

I'm in a mess.

I must have more money, but I can't for the life of me think where I can get some from. Since that fifteen pounds there's not been a single opportunity of getting any more. Seven weeks without a possible chance.

Perhaps two or three chances will crop up close together, soon, but I want the money now.

And anyway I don't want to do that again, somehow. It's not that I'm frightened of Mr. Gaskell—at least I am now, now I've got a job to lose, but I wouldn't be when I'd lost it, and I'd got the certainty of prison in front of me. I wouldn't be then. I'd give as good as I got, and better.

No, it's not that. But I want to wash my hands of all that sort of work. I wouldn't mind sitting in a grand office cheating on a large scale, but I've had enough of the sneak-thief end of it. I'm not sorry about it, mind you. I did it, and I got away with it, and it's all over now. But I don't want to start it again.

If only I could get a reply to the advertisements I keep writing after. . . .

You wouldn't believe how cold it can be at six o'clock in a morning at the beginning of September.

Helen had been horrified at my idea of travelling workman: she wasn't going to let me do it, she said. But at six o'clock in a morning she was so fast asleep she might just as well have been a hundred miles away. And then when I came home at nights she was that loving because I was doing it for a present for her, as she thought, that I felt jolly mean about her not knowing that as I was so hard up I had to do it anyway. But I didn't feel mean enough to let it interfere with the loving. That loving at night was all right.

But in the morning, it was the very devil. It's bad enough getting up at six o'clock anyway, even after a good night's sleep. But when you've not got to sleep until one or two o'clock it's another matter.

And when that's happened four times in succession it's another matter still. That Thursday morning I missed the train at Edgware I was in a dream. I had a vague idea of the alarm clock bell ringing like mad, and then the awful feeling that the ringing had been a long time ago and I'd been to sleep since. It was light enough to see the face of the clock all right, even from where I stood dressing on the other side of the bed, and even with sleep clouding my eyes, but that clock gains three minutes an hour and I was too tired to do sums. I staggered into the kitchen and I filled the kettle, half full. It's an electric kettle and you can't just heat a cup of water in it because a cupful only reaches to the bottom of the heater and it's nearly as quick to boil half a kettleful. That gives me my shaving water, and I can just plug in

again to bring the rest of it to boiling point for the cocoa when I've finished shaving. Helen told me about that.

I had a rotten shave. The bathroom window is small—frosted glass, too—and at that time in the morning the light isn't good enough to shave by, and I had to switch on the electric light. That made me realize that winter wasn't so far off. And it was so cold the steam from the shaving water kept misting the glass, and I had to wipe it over with the dry part of my hand every few seconds. That, too, made me realize that winter wasn't so far off.

When I'd finished in the bathroom I switched on the electric grill, and then mixed some cocoa in a jug and cut a slice of bread. By the time the water had boiled up again and I'd made the cocoa the griller was hot enough to put the bread underneath. Now that I was washed and shaved I was feeling more like a live man, and I had my collar and tie on by the time the bread had to be turned over; and by the time the other side was done I'd got my waistcoat and jacket on and put my keys and money in my pockets. The bread was toasted to a turn, and it smelled good. The cocoa was good, too. I had my breakfast whilst I put on my shoes, got the paper from the door, found my hat—I never seem to put it in the same place twice—and went back into the bedroom to make sure that I really had got my keys and money and that there was nothing I'd forgotten. And when I got back in the kitchen the smell of that toast and cocoa I'd had made me feel hungrier than I'd been before my breakfast.

If I felt hungry now how would I feel at lunch time? Coffee and roll and butter wasn't going to help much. On the table was half a loaf of bread and butter and a knife and almost before I knew what I was doing I was cutting up something for lunch. Where I was going to eat it I didn't know—not in the office—but I was going to eat it somewhere. I cut four slices, in a hurry—the last one was torn off the loaf rather than cut—and wrapped them in that grease-proof paper the bread comes in, and then I was outside and running down the road like a two year old.

I knew now I was going to miss the workman train unless I managed to catch the bus that stops at the road beyond the Estate Office, and I didn't catch it. It was ten minutes to eight when I got to the station.

I thought perhaps if I explained to the booking clerk he'd issue me a workman ticket—I must still have been half asleep, I should think. He couldn't issue me a workman, of course, and I felt a fool for asking him. But I felt something more than a fool when he told me I'd have to pay full fare—two and twopence, I thought he said. Two and twopence! The workman's

fare is less than half. It's only ninepence or tenpence for a cheap day, but they don't issue cheap days until ten o'clock. Between half-past seven and ten then it's two and twopence. That's the price of three days' travelling, and I was hanged if I was going to pay it. When you've gone to the length I was going to, to save a few shillings, you don't throw two and twopence away like that. I wouldn't pay it, and I told them so. I'd go by tram and bus first, I said, and walked out of the station.

I was wide awake now, right enough, and my brain was working like mad. I'd watch myself throw two and twopence away. I took the tram, but only to Burnt Oak. At Burnt Oak Underground I got a twopenny return to Colindale—the booking clerk didn't know me at Burnt Oak, and wouldn't have suspected anything as the Edgware people would have done. I didn't go down to Strand Station, for the same reason—the ticket collector there would probably recognize me. I got off the train at Leicester Square. I'd plenty of time to get nervous going up that escalator at Leicester Square; you could read half your morning paper getting to the top, and that's exactly what I did, or tried to do. When I stepped off at the top I didn't start fumbling in all my pockets for my ticket, as I've seen lots of people do. They make such a show of searching themselves that I've often thought they were playing the game. I just walked up to the collector, in line with everybody else, and gave him twopence as I took a step to his side.

"Not worth getting undressed for," I said, smiling at him, "for a ticket from Warren Street." He smiled back. "Doesn't matter about a chit," I said, and walked slowly away. I wasn't going to walk quickly, not me. But he didn't call me back or anything. I walked out of the station, wondering if the collectors give up all the money they get without having to give a chit for them. Most of them, I suppose, do. Some of them, I'll bet, don't.

It was pleasant, not being three-quarters of an hour too early for work. I'd just be there in nice time without having to hurry, so I sauntered down the streets in Covent Garden, there, always keeping on the side where the sunshine was. It was very quiet in Covent Garden, because most of the work is done by that time, I suppose, and the people at breakfast. In most of the places there would be just one fat man standing amongst all the boxes of apples and bananas, staring blankly into the street as though he had passed over into some other life for the space of an hour or two, until everybody else should come back from breakfast; or a sad young man sitting on top of an upturned box with an air about him that made you think that sitting on the tops of upturned boxes was a job that took a bit of doing. Nobody bothered about me, and I was able to keep stopping and looking at the names on the

boxes—California, Seville, Canary Islands, Nova Scotia, Barbados, Brazil. Magic names, right enough, especially in early September sunshine. I'd certainly like to go and see places like that. But it was a funny thing that what I thought about that morning was how good it was to be living in my bungalow at Edgware with Helen, without the possibility of being found out about that money and having to spend the rest of my life wandering about just such countries as those on my own. You can't beat honesty and safety, I thought; being able to go into the office in a morning without your heart swelling like a balloon and nearly choking you to death. I wasn't half glad that fifteen pounds was over and done with and that I hadn't taken any more.

Of course, I wasn't forgetting about dodging on the underground. But I'd got away with that one way, and it would be easy enough going back—take a penny ticket at one of the town stations and then get off at Burnt Oak and hand in the return half of the twopenny ticket I'd taken. I'd have to take a penny tram up to Edgware, but the total cost would only have been sevenpence as against two shillings and twopence, and the risk practically nonexistent—and, the real point, even if a miracle happened and I was found out, I'd only get fined. It wasn't like going to prison. I'd probably be fined ten shillings or a pound and Helen know nothing about it; and if she did know something about it she'd believe whatever lies I told to try and get out of it.

I really was glad that money was over and done with.

There's a man sits round the corner of our street, just off the Strand, selling fruit, and I bought four bananas off him for twopence. Four bananas and four slices of bread and butter, and perhaps a twopenny cake from Lyons', would make a better lunch than a roll and butter. And, having bananas, I could probably manage without a cup of tea. For another penny I could sit in a public convenience and eat them in peace. You might wonder why I couldn't sit and eat them in the office convenience, but you can take it from me I couldn't. It would be a penny well spent.

But the more I thought about that penny the more I didn't want to spend it. A penny is only a penny, true, but I'd already saved twopence on the usual workman's fare I pay, and twopence and a penny are threepence, and threepence is half way to sixpence. And I'd really be quite private in our little accounts office during the dinner hour. Everybody goes out to lunch, except the office boy, and he sits in the general office with a penny dreadful

in a drawer. And anyway, why shouldn't I have my lunch in the office if I like?

So at about ten past one, when everybody but me and the boy and Mr. Gaskell and Mr. Nolan, together in the front office: they'd often work through the lunch hour together, especially when Mr. Gaskell hadn't got down to the office till eleven, as he hadn't this morning—when everybody else had gone I sent the boy out for a penny ice bun from Lyons': might as well make the threepence saved into fourpence, I thought.

"I'll attend to the 'phone," I said, and he nipped off downstairs. I wandered about the general office a minute or two, reading what was in the typewriters and just nosing about, and then I saw all the tea things ready on two trays by the telephone switchboard, and it suddenly occurred to me that I could make a cup of tea of sorts in about three minutes, if I just brewed it in a cup instead of the tea-pot, and I had a cupful of water on in the kettle in no time. Then I took three lumps of sugar out of the packet and managed to get about a tablespoonful of milk out of the bottle without it being noticeably short when the cardboard disk had been put back. The only thing was, that it was too creamy, being from the top, even when I'd shaken the bottle. I don't like cream.

The tea was made, and on my desk, when the office boy got back, and the tea things to all intents and purposes just as they had been before. I'd rinse my cup out afterwards, I thought, and slip it back on the tray when nobody was looking. I felt a bit daft, having gone to all that trouble just to get a cup of tea—or, really, just to keep quiet about my having lunches on the cheap. Very faintly I could hear the sound of Mr. Gaskell's voice in his office, and it made me a bit mad, somehow. I wondered if he'd have got where he is if he'd had to sneak about with his lunches, like this. Having money behind you makes so much difference in this world that it makes you think it isn't one world, really, but two.

My cup of tea was a sad mess, I found, when I had carefully shut the door of the little office and sat down with my paper of food in front of me. The top was swimming with tea leaves, and when I'd got most of them off and could see the tea itself it looked a funny colour to me. I had a sip of it, and I thought I wouldn't have more of that stuff than I needed to get the bread and butter down.

I opened the *Daily Telegraph* out in front of me, at the advertisements page, so I could drop it right over everything on the desk if anybody should

happen to come in, and before I'd read the first advertisement somebody did happen to come in. Mr. Nolan looked at me in surprise.

"Thought you'd be at lunch," he said. "Those sales cheques. Returned."

"In the safe," I said, wondering if he wanted to know where they were. He got them out, a bundle of about fifty cheques, passed through the bank and returned to the payer. We aren't the payors, as a matter of fact, we are the payees. That's another wangle of Mr. Gaskell's. These what we call sales cheques are certain sales made by agents of Mr. Gaskell's, and there must be something bogus about them because we never have any correspondence or details about them—so's we can't be implicated if anything goes wrong, I suppose. We just transfer the goods to these agents who're Mr. Gaskell's nominees, and then they make out cheques to us for whatever they've sold them for, I suppose. If anything did go wrong I reckoned the agents would have to take the blame. One of them, I know, is an undischarged bankrupt. I have to be very careful about these cheques that they hand over to us when we've passed them through our bank, partly because they're the only record of the actual amounts (if there was any twisting that's the only way Mr. Gaskell would find out), and partly because the auditors are very keen on seeing them—they don't like our audit over much as it is, and I don't suppose they'd pass the accounts if they couldn't vouch these particular sales from the used cheques.

Mr. Nolan slipped the rubber band off them, and started looking at them. I wished he'd go. It was awkward sitting at my desk with the *Telegraph* spread all over it and my lunch underneath. And then, worse still, I heard Mr. Gaskell coming across the other office. He was talking as he walked; loudly, so's the manager would be able to hear him.

"And they'd better be passed in to me, every week, too. I'm having no more Minshull tricks in this damned office. . . ." He paused in the doorway, looking at me, first with surprise and then with disinterest. He didn't care a bit about me having heard what he said. I was the only one who could have tried any monkey tricks with those cheques, and it was me he was thinking of, but he didn't care whether I knew it or not. My skin seemed to burn and I bet anything that I was flushing. That fellow didn't half think he was smart.

I found myself standing up, and was mad at myself. Why should I stand up for a fat louse like that?

Mr. Gaskell took the cheques. By comparing them with the figures of the people who sell for him he would know that they'd all gone through, and there was nothing wrong with them. He took them and turned to go out of

the office, then he looked hard at the desk I had just got up from. He could see one corner of the *Telegraph* soaking wet and steam curling up from it. He stepped forward and lifted up the *Telegraph*. He stared at the pieces of bread and butter and the cup of tea.

"What's this?" he asked. I didn't say anything. He could see damned well what it was, couldn't he? He bent over the cup of tea and sniffed a bit.

"Tea?" he said. "My God! Tea." It did look pretty bad, that funny colour and all the tea leaves on top of it. "Tea! Hell! That's not tea, it's pig-swill." And he straightened himself up and looked at me as though I was a pig for drinking it. Hell! Did he think I wanted to drink it? I could feel myself trembling as he walked out of the office. It's marvellous what having a job to keep does for you. I could hardly see him go for the red blotches in front of my eyes.

I swept the bread and butter—the ice bun and all—into the waste paper basket and poured the tea into the coal scuttle. That, I thought, was the limit. The fellow wouldn't give me enough wages to have anything better and then despised me for having what I had to have. It was no good telling myself that it was my own fault I was drinking tea like that, that if I hadn't gone out to Edgware I wouldn't have had to save coppers like this. It was no good telling myself that because I knew perfectly well that if he'd looked in at where we'd lived, at Andertons', as he'd looked at that tea I was drinking, he'd have said: "A home! Hell! That's not a home, it's a pig-sty." What in hell did he think I could do on three pounds a week?

I was furious. My lips kept getting dry and burning as I sat at my desk, and I kept licking them with my tongue. He paid me three pounds a week, and dared act like that. And he was taking jolly good care I didn't get more than three pounds a week, too. No more Minshull tricks, eh? That fellow thought he was smart, and no mistake. I'd a good mind to stamp into his office and tell him about the fifteen pounds I'd diddled him of. I really had a good mind to do that. It would be worth busting everything up, just to show him there was somebody about the place as smart as he was, and smarter.

I cooled down after a bit, but I didn't hate him any the less. I hated him more. I knew that in spite of what I'd been thinking this morning, about how good it was being honest and safe and able to come to the office in a morning without being in a funk, I knew that I was going to take the first opportunity of getting some more money. I simply had to have some money. And it was pretty obvious that Mr. Gaskell was going to tighten things up until there were no more chances of getting any more.

I hated him, all right.

I calmed down a bit in the afternoon. To go on trying to get more money from the firm now that Mr. Gaskell was like this was simply running my head into a noose, I told myself. And I was fed up with dishonesty, anyway. This morning, going round Covent Garden like that, seeing all those names of foreign places, it had been grand to feel as I had felt then, to be able to come into the office without the tightening feeling inside. That sense of freedom, I said to myself, was worth everything else in the world.

I admit I got even to wondering if there was any chance of selling the bungalow and making a pound or two on it. I really did. I'd made it nice, now, with all the shelves and things I'd put up, and the shed and the gardens; surely it would be worth somebody's while who was thinking of buying one of the new ones to pay a few pounds extra and have ours? I didn't know just what we would do then—certainly not go back to anything like Andertons'—but I had a vague idea we could perhaps get something satisfactory for a few shillings a week less. Why I should have an idea like that—even a vague idea—is beyond me; because I knew perfectly well that we couldn't. But just in that mood I felt that it was worth everything to be honest and have that sense of freedom I'd had that morning. Whilst I was honest, like this, I was one up on old Gaskell, with his nominee salesmen and subsidiary concerns.

And then I thought of the journey home, at night, and the twopenny return to Burnt Oak, and I couldn't kid myself that I was going to get any fun in paying the full fare home and being honest about it. I just wasn't going to pay the full fare home and be honest about it. What I was afraid of, I saw, was not taking what wasn't mine at all; what I was afraid of was taking what was old Gaskell's.

When I thought of it like that it didn't improve my temper, you can bet.

Mr. Gaskell sent for me at four o'clock. Mr. Nolan was in with him, and they were still on with tightening up the system we had so there should be no possibility of future leakages. That affair of Minshull had certainly upset Mr. Gaskell.

I have to say this for him: Mr. Gaskell really was smart. He showed me how a rebates account had to be kept, in future; it was complicated and meant a lot of work most offices wouldn't have bothered with, but it also

meant there would be no more chances of windfalls like that eight pounds three shillings happening again. The cash purchases side he had already dealt with, and there was only one other source of possible differences and that was in all the sundry receipts we have that are so various they can't be systematized. Whenever we got any money that didn't fit into the rest of the system, he said, we not only had to show it in the "sundries" column of the cash book but we had to send both a receipt from a separate receipt book, that had to be passed into Mr. Gaskell himself, and in addition to send a written acknowledgment which he himself would sign.

It was—diabolical; that's the word. The man might have read my thoughts this last few weeks, the way he'd got everything covered up. I wondered if he must have suspected me, and went cold in the small of my back.

And then, when he started to explain all the alterations to me for the second time, very carefully going over every point as though he thought I wasn't clever enough to understand the first time, I saw that he didn't suspect me at all.

The blighter didn't even think I was smart enough to twist him. He was just making the system fool-proof, because he was that sort of a smart man.

The system was fool-proof, too, when Mr. Gaskell had done with it; but the man who made the saying "where there's a will there's a way" knew what he was talking about. There was one way of getting round it all right, I found; though it was risky. At least, it was risky for about a week after you'd done it. If you weren't discovered then you were safe.

And I did it right away, because it was Thursday afternoon, and on Thursday afternoon I write out the cheques; and it was with one of the cheques that the scheme began. It was a risky beginning, but it is best to have a risky beginning than a risky ending.

I usually have about a hundred cheques for him to sign, including the "open" cheques for two or three hundred pounds, depending how much the wages and cash for that week come to. Our cash isn't kept on that system of drawing a cheque for the amount spent the previous week to bring the cash back to a stable balance—the "Imprest" system I think it's called. We couldn't do that because it varies so much, and you have to guess how much you'll want. It may be five pounds. It may be fifty. You can't know properly until the end of the following week, and if you find you've guessed too

much you have to re-bank some of it, because Mr. Gaskell doesn't like having more cash in the safe than is necessary.

So you see Mr. Gaskell has to sign the cash cheque more or less in the dark. And as he doesn't like doing anything in the dark he's soon round during the next week to see that you've re-banked any cash you've drawn more than you need.

This week I reckoned I'd need about twenty pounds, so I made the cheque out for thirty. About Wednesday, I thought, I'd re-bank ten. Mr. Gaskell sometimes asks me for the rough figures that I've based my estimate on, and as I couldn't think of anything that would amount to thirty I put the cash cheque under the half dozen cheques I reckoned he'd query most, and put those at the top of the pile. If you're used to signing a hundred cheques in about half an hour and you find you've spent about ten minutes on the first two or three, you're likely to go a bit faster for awhile. That was how I worked it out, anyway; and he signed the cash cheque all right without a question. That was the first part of it through all right. I just had to cash the cheque and wait till Wednesday.

By Wednesday I usually get in five or six sales cheques—those from his sales agents he'd started to be so particular about. As I expected, there was one for something less than ten pounds—eight guineas, as a matter of fact. There usually is one for less than ten pounds.

What I did then was simplicity itself. I took ten pounds in cash from the safe, and wrote in the books: "Cash Re-banked £10." I took eight pounds eight shillings of this, carefully put it in an envelope—Miss Nixon and young Potter were working away in the office—and equally carefully put it in my pocket. That money wasn't going to leave my pocket, either, till I left work. The other one pound twelve shillings I put in another envelope, together with the agent's cheque for eight guineas, and paid it into the bank as the ten pounds cash I had re-banked. I paid the other agents' cheques into the bank, too, on a separate paying-in slip and entered them into my cash book. I couldn't enter the eight guinea cheque into my cash book, of course, because it was already part of the figure of ten pounds cash re-banked. That was where the risk came in: it was just possible Mr. Gaskell might compare the cheques, when returned to us, with my figures in the cash book. It was just possible but very unlikely, because it was a far better check for him to compare them with the actual private records he gets from the agents, and if these agreed it proved that all the money paid by the agents had passed

through our bank, and what more than that could he possibly want to know? He wanted to know whether I had re-banked the ten pounds cash, though, and he even looked it up in the pass book, to make sure it really had been paid in. I'd not really thought he would, but he did. Anyway, there it was, plain enough for him to see: the correct amount on the correct date.

Now that is really clever. The more you think about it the more you have to admit that that is clever. I was real sorry I couldn't up and tell old Gaskell, standing staring at the pass book, by the side of my desk, what I'd done. It was so clever I bet he wouldn't have understood it, for a long time.

VII

I didn't pay anything off the instalments owing on the furniture or the house, after all. With the eight guineas I'd taken and the thirty shillings I'd saved and my three pounds wages I didn't pay a penny off the instalments. You'd hardly credit it, but I bought Helen a fur coat, and it cost me eleven pounds.

One of our travellers popped his head round the office door on the Friday, the day but one before her birthday.

"Want to buy your wife a fur coat?" he asked. "I've got a chance of some beauties!"

"Yes," I said, "and I want the money to do it with, too." I'm not such a fool as all that.

He came into the office. His name's Schneckenfeyer, but he's English. He's a round little man with a wife who costs him more than he can afford, and that's how he makes the difference, peddling round odd bargains he hears of—and they're real bargains, too. Old Parker got a wonderful sideboard off him, for two pounds, and Miss Nixon got her sister's baby's pram, a standard make, at about half the shop price. I got our wireless set from him. I thought perhaps a fur coat from him would be two or three pounds—I'm sure I've seen quite good ones in shops for a fiver—so I played the game a bit.

"Now I come to think of it," I said, "I know somebody who might like to buy one if it's a real bargain."

He nodded his head towards the front of the building. "Guv'nor in?"

"No," I said. "Nolan's out too."

He dashed down to his car—a six-year-old model the firm got him for twenty pounds—and in a minute he was back with the coat; and I've never seen a coat like that in my life, not even on Regent Street. I've since seen coats that cost hundreds of guineas, but I can't see what they've got on this. It's a mink, he says, as Miss Nixon has fits all round it; a Lake Superior skin. I don't know what that means, but Schneckenfeyer's a decent chap and wouldn't do the dirty on anybody. Besides, Miss Nixon should know a bit about fur coats—girls always do—and the way she's carrying on about it

you'd think there's nothing she wouldn't do for it. And if Miss Nixon feels like that about it, what, you think, will Helen feel like?

I nearly had a fit when he told me the price, fifteen guineas. I was the rest of Friday afternoon getting it down to twelve pounds ten, and most of Saturday morning getting a thirty shilling commission for myself for getting this person I'm supposed to know of to have it. Helen has since shown me a similar coat in a shop in the West End labelled thirty guineas.

I wrote letters to the Royal, and to the building society, right away, explaining that what I called domestic complications had made it difficult for me to fulfil my obligations, and outlining a proposal to wipe out the arrears by weekly payments. I hoped they would find themselves able to accept this offer; but as I rushed off home on Saturday midday I didn't care whether they accepted or not.

When I got home Helen was at the bottom of the garden, gathering beans. I suppose that's what's called tact. Anyway, I was able to put the coat on a hanger, and hang it at the back of the other things in the wardrobe. I locked the wardrobe, then, and pocketed the key, and went out to Helen at the bottom of the garden. We never said a word about it being her birthday tomorrow.

I'd meant to get up before Helen, Sunday morning, and surprise her with breakfast in bed. I'd had mine in bed every Sunday since we'd been at the bungalow, and I thought it would be a nice beginning for her birthday, for me to get her breakfast instead.

But I wakened up to the sound and smell of bacon frying in the kitchen. Although the sunshine was pouring through the window there was a real autumn nip in the air, and that bacon smelt real good. I'd had toast for my breakfast every morning that week and bacon again was something to look forward to.

I pretended still to be asleep, when Helen came into the bedroom with my breakfast on the tray. She put the tray down on the chair at the side of the bed and bent down and kissed me, and before she could move I'd got her head in my hands and was tugging at her curls. Twenty-two pulls, and one for good luck that brought the tears to her eyes. And her eyes were sparkling enough, anyway. She was on edge to see what I'd got for her birthday; jumping about like a cat on hot bricks.

"Have your breakfast first," she said, nearly spilling the milk over me as she fixed the tray, "and I'll guess while you're eating."

She guessed all manner of thing, none of them so good as I knew she was hoping for—handbag, compact, umbrella, underwear, dressing-gown, toilet-set, and so on. She kept it up until I'd finished my breakfast, and when she'd taken the tray off the bed I got up and slipped on my old flannel bags and a pullover and made her stand in front of the dressing-table mirror and shut her eyes. I kissed them both, to make sure they were properly shut. Then I opened the wardrobe and took the coat out—it looked grand—and stood behind her with it and then when I told her to open her eyes I put it round her.

She nearly jumped through the roof. She was so excited she couldn't put her arms in the sleeves for about five minutes, for stroking it and kissing me and rubbing her cheek on the collar. She reminded me of a cat in front of a warm fire, somehow, when she did that. It was a great, wide collar, and there were two sort of fur tails, like the ends of a scarf, for tying together when the coat was fastened. You never saw anybody look like Helen looked in that fur coat, with her blonde curls rolling up above the collar at the back and her face a flame of delight at the front. She kept kissing me and running back to the mirror, and kissing me again and then running to the mirror in the living room, to make sure she really did look how she seemed to look in the dressing-table mirror; and I kept teasing her and laughing, and she kept laughing too. You'd have thought we were both drunk. We only came back to something like our ordinary senses when the electricity meter gave that bang that indicates the last shilling has gone, and Helen yelled: "Good Lord! I've left the kettle on." When I opened the kitchen door the steam came pouring out like mad, and inside it was so thick you couldn't see a thing.

Helen had put a fire in the living room, the first for weeks, because of the nip in the air, and it looked so warm and cosy I didn't go into the garden right away, as I usually do, but sat in front of it with the Sunday paper, whilst Helen kept coming and sitting down with me for a few minutes, whenever she could leave the getting ready of the dinner for that long. "In a few minutes," she said, "I'll be able to leave it for about an hour. Don't go," and sure enough in ten minutes she was back, with the fur coat on again.

"You'll wear it out before tea-time," I said—I'd promised her we should go out for a walk into Edgware, after tea. She came and stood in front of my chair.

"Will I?" she said, smiling at me. "But I can't take it off; you'll have to take it off for me." She held out her hands, and I got hold of them and pulled myself out of the chair. She looked absurdly little, somehow, in that fur coat, although really, I suppose, she's a bit on the tall side for a woman—five feet seven, I think she is. Still, that's five inches shorter than me, and she did look little as I stood over her and unfastened the coat. She twirled round so that I could slip the coat from her arms, and I buried my face in her curls and kissed them. And then when I took the coat off, there she stood without a stitch of clothing on. She turned round to me, keeping her eyes down, and slid her bare arms under my jacket and pressed herself close to me. It was warm all right, in front of that fire, but I knew my hands were too cold to touch her, so I put my arms round her, but with my hands spread out to the fire, so's they'd get warmer, and we stood just like that saying nothing for perhaps five minutes. Then when my hands felt warm enough I picked her up and sank down on the easy chair again, with Helen on my knees, snuggling on my chest, and our faces and lips together. She seemed terribly little and pathetic, somehow. I didn't want to touch her a bit. I felt different about her than I'd felt before, somehow. I could have got excited, all right, but I didn't want to get excited, somehow. The fur coat was over the back of the chair and I could just get it with my free hand, and I covered her up with it.

She pulled her lips away from mine and looked up at me, at that.

It was jolly difficult to explain. "I'm still mad about you," I said, "but I don't want . . . you know . . . just now. I could, right enough—I'd like to, you can bet—but not just now. Not perhaps for a day or two. I love you enough without that. I don't need you to be like that, to get you a fur coat. I can't make you understand."

"No," she said, looking at me with wide eyes, so close to mine I could see the reflection of my face in them. "No."

I tried again. "You don't seem—like that—now. You seem—little. Like a little girl, somehow. If I did that, now, I'd feel I was—forcing you."

There was a slight smile on her face now. It puckered up the corners of her eyes and mouth. "I don't mind," she said. "I don't mind that." She stopped looking in my eyes and looked at my nose, as if it was a hundred miles away. "It's often like that. I don't mind it. I should have hated it before, at Andertons'. But I don't mind it now. You're different, now." She stopped for a long time, searching for words I suppose. "You don't understand women. A woman doesn't hate being forced by her man when

he's a forceful man, forceful with other men, as well as with her. What she hates is being forced by a man who isn't a forceful man. A man who's just a nobody when he's dealing with other men."

"Like I was, before," I said, feeling queer.

She looked into my eyes again. "Yes," she said, very softly. "Yes." She thought about it. "I loved you then all right, but in a different way. You couldn't get me a proper home, then, and there's something missing in a woman when she hasn't a home. Respect—that's it. So I had to make sure of your respect all the time, before. I was too taken up with doing that, to let you love me properly. To let you do whatever you wanted to do. If I'd have given in to you then you'd have despised me, because then you weren't used to people giving in to you. Now you are. Or you seem to be, anyway. You can get what you want—what I want. You get me a home. You get me a fur coat. So now, now you can get your own way about other things, you can get your own way with me without despising me."

I was too surprised to say anything. I'd never have thought Helen would think things out like this.

"Oh you don't know how lovely it is!" she burst out suddenly, wriggling, "being able to give in to you without being afraid. Being able to let myself go, without fear of you despising me. You don't despise me, do you?" she asked softly. "Even when I'm—awful? When I say awful things?"

"I love you," I said quickly. "You know I do."

She believed that. "I can tell you do," she said, and nodded. "It's lovely. It's lovely giving in to you. You don't know. A woman would sooner be killed by the right man than be given a million pounds by the wrong one. We're funny, I suppose."

"And I suppose I was the wrong man, before?"

She frowned, slightly, then laughed. "You're the right one now, all right. I'd sooner . . . I'd sooner——"

"What?"

The colour began to flood in her face. "I'd sooner be—punished by you, as you are now, than loved by you as you were before." She hid her face on my chest. "You never wash up for me now," she said, "you never make the bed or get any meals ready, and I love it. I love having to do it all myself. Before, when you used to help me, I didn't like it. I didn't like you doing it. But I wasn't going to let you not do it. D'you see what I mean?" She looked

at me, again, her face still flushed and a look in her eyes like you might see if you caught somebody doing something wrong.

"I think so," I said, but I was thinking of something else. I was thinking what she'd feel if she knew I was still getting three pounds a week—worse, if she knew I had stolen the extra money that had meant the home and the fur coat.

"Listen," I said. "Suppose I told you I wasn't really any different, at all. Suppose I told you that I was just the same, but that I'd been left a hundred pounds by a distant relative you don't know about——"

"But you've not," she said, quickly, her eyes wide again, and looking right into mine. "You've not. You've no relatives with money. You wouldn't have been hard up in patches, like you have been. You'd never have gone workman. Besides," she said, and I could feel the relief in her voice, "you are different. You're different yourself. It's not just having more money. You're different."

"Yes," I said, "yes." It was no good bothering any further. I knew what I wanted to know. "Yes," I said, "I'm different." I held the coat so that she could get her arms in the sleeves, and she got off my knees and stood up on the hearth-rug in front of the fire, looking, with her fur coat round her, like a queen. A minute before she had been naked on my knees, like a pathetic little child, and now she was like a queen.

"You look like a queen," I said. "But queens aren't usually good lookers."

"I feel like a queen," she smiled. "It's the fur coat does it. I feel just like a queen." She held out her hand to me and I got up from the chair and went down on one knee and took her hand and kissed the back of it, like you see men do on the pictures in those historical films they sometimes have. And she swept out of the room, proud looking as any queen you'd see in a thousand years.

It's the fur coat does it, she'd said, and it was wonderful how right she was. The more I thought about it the more I saw how right she was. It was the difference between the naked, pathetic little girl that I could do anything I liked to, and the proud queen I wanted to kneel to. It was the same with Mr. Gaskell and me. I'm smart as he is, any day—I'd shown that. He's more experience, of course, but he hadn't when he was my age. At my age he'd nothing on me. I bet today I'm smarter than he was then, I'd take bigger

risks, I'd work harder (I'd like to see Gaskell travelling workman), and I'm twice as big and energetic. The difference was, that he had money and I haven't. It was like the fur coat—his father could buy him a proper education. He got an air of authority, a belief that he was better than people like me, as a part of his education. His father bought it him just as I had bought that fur coat for Helen. Take the way he talks. He talks no better than I do. He slurs all his words together and swears about one word in four; but that means nothing to him because he's been taught to believe that he's better than people like me, and he can get away with it. I can't get away with it. When I happen to come across people who do speak properly I feel a bit ashamed of the way I speak. I keep my mouth shut. But Gaskell, he doesn't feel ashamed of himself. He despises them for talking as they've learned to talk, and not talking as they want to talk—in that coarse, slurring, swearing way that he probably thinks is the way they'd like to talk if they could get away with it. It's the fur coat does it, right enough.

I ran a stick along the drill of loose soil I'd got ready for the lettuce. The lettuce I'd put in in June had been a wash-out. The birds had got at it, in spite of the pieces of wool I'd pegged down, and it had been pecked as soon as the little plants had appeared. I wasn't going to let that happen again. I'd got a length of wire netting and bent it into a sort of long cloche, and I was going to put that down as soon as I'd sown the seeds. That would keep the birds off, surely. I moved the pile of cropped grass I'd been lining the drill with—that's the way to grow lettuce: plenty of new cropped grass about four inches under the surface of the soil.

I kept thinking about the way Helen had talked that morning. I couldn't get over it. You didn't know what was going on in people's heads, did you? Her head had always seemed full of clothes and loving and the pictures and, before we had come here, what we could do with another pound or two, or what we might be able to do in a few months if I got an advance or if she got a job, too. I was not the only one who was different in our house, since we'd come to Edgware here. But I was different, too. She was right. I was different somehow.

Having Helen as she was, and this garden to work in nights and week-ends, had made a big difference. But it was more than that. It was this taking money from the firm that was the real difference.

It had changed me. I was a bit frightened about it, I don't mind admitting; but now I was frightened of something definite. Before I had been vaguely frightened of all sorts of things in a rotten, uncertain sort of way that had made me feel uneasy and apologetic. I had been frightened that I'd

get fired, or Helen get fed up with me, or that I'd never get an advance, or a house at a rent we could afford, or that we'd quarrel with Andertons and have to find rooms within a week and pay, as we probably should have to pay without time to look round, fifteen or eighteen shillings a week for them. Or a thousand things that in themselves were daft to be frightened of but which, altogether, made me nervous all the time. I hadn't got that uneasy, apologetic look about me now. I didn't call people "sir," now, if they came into the office and looked at me as if I wasn't up to much. I'd always used to say "sir" to them to be on the safe side, they might be friends of Mr. Gaskell's—they might even be the director I'd never seen, Sir Abe Pangbourne, for all I knew. But now I'd got something definite to worry about, and I knew just where I stood. I didn't call anybody "sir," now, except Mr. Gaskell, and him not very often. And I wasn't half so frightened of him as I used to be. I wasn't frightened of him at all. I was a better man than him, so why should I be frightened of him?

I layered the soil over the lettuce seed, rubbing out any hard lumps into powder, and thought about Mr. Gaskell.

I am a better man than him, I thought, aren't I? I'd proved that. I was smarter than him. He thought he could make it impossible for anybody to get money off him, but he couldn't. He was smart, but I was smarter. It was quite true that he was an honest man, and I was a thief, but that didn't make him better than me. He was honest so far as the law couldn't do anything to him, sure enough, but behind the scenes he was as big a twister as any thief you'd meet in all London. He had special subsidiary companies to cheat for him in his buying, and he had special agents to cheat for him in part of his selling. And with regard to the main part of our business, the mail-order side, the whole thing was cheating of the worst sort. If you read the Sunday papers you'll probably have seen our advertisements—two inch squares, usually, advertising blankets or overcoats or wristlet watches or bicycles—those are our main lines—for sale on easy payments. If you read our advertisements you get the impression that the blankets or overcoats or wristlet watches or bicycles will be sent to you on payment of a deposit, and that you can pay the balance by monthly instalments. You get that impression because that's how most of the firms who advertise do their business. Everybody gets that impression. They see our prices are very cheap and they think the goods must be all right because, of course, you can't sell bogus stuff by instalments. If you've taken people in too badly they'll send the goods back or just not pay the remaining instalments. So people send us deposits—five shillings—seven-and-sixpence—ten shillings—and we just send them a receipt and tell them the goods will be forwarded

when they've paid the rest of the instalments. They kick up a fuss at that, but we're quite in the right. We tell them to read the advertisement carefully and when they do read it carefully they find we've never committed ourselves to send them the goods right away. We've given them that impression, but we've not committed ourselves. So they have to pay the full price before they can get our goods, either right away or when they can, and then when they get the goods and find that they're absolute rubbish and not worth a quarter of what they've paid, they've already paid it, and it's too late to do anything about it.

Mind you, I'm not preaching about that. I wish I was in Mr. Gaskell's position and making six thousand a year, like he does, doing just that. It's no worse than happens in hundreds of other businesses, so far as I can see, and it happens because people who are cheated don't do anything about it and just continue to let it happen. It's their fault, not the fault of the people who run the businesses, in my opinion. But it doesn't alter the fact that it's cheating, and that it's at least as bad as what I'm doing and probably worse, even if only because I'm running a good risk of being put in prison for what I'm doing.

Another thing, too. I'm only taking what I reckon is mine anyway. I'm doing a five pounds a week job, and I ought to have five pounds a week for it. I can't get five pounds a week off him because this is a time when there are a lot of five pound a week men out of work and they're ready enough to take my job and do it for what I'm getting—three pounds a week. But I need five pounds a week. I can't manage on three pounds a week, I've tried it. I need five pounds a week so much that I'll take it and risk prison, rather than continue to live on three pounds a week and keep on the right side of the law. That is wrong, I know. But that is how I feel about it; and that's what I'm telling you.

I'd sooner be honest than dishonest. But I'd sooner be dishonest and have five pounds a week and live in this bungalow and have this garden, and have Helen how she is, than be honest on three pounds a week and live how we were living in Camberwell, and that's a fact. I'll risk being found out. It's worth it. It's worth going to the office in the morning with your stomach swaying about inside you and being petrified with fright at your desk when you're occasionally asked an awkward question, or sent for by Mr. Gaskell when you don't know what it is you're wanted for. It's worth it.

And when Helen says you're different from what you used to be she's saying no more than the truth. You are different. There are a lot of people swindling their employers in London—you can't read your evening paper

without seeing that. There may be hundreds—perhaps even thousands. But there are hundreds of thousands of the sort of person you were before. There are hundreds of thousands getting three pounds a week, and more hundreds of thousands getting four, five and six pounds a week, depending on what luck they've happened to have, with what firms they've happened to take jobs; what influence they possess; but they might just as easily be getting three pounds a week, and they wouldn't do anything about it if they were getting three pounds a week. You have done something about it. You've been clever enough to get away with it, so far, and you've nerve enough to keep on doing it. You're going to keep on doing it to just the amount that would make your wage into five pounds a week. You're going to take just that much; no more and no less. You are different, all right.

Helen put on a tight little hat that looked to me like a few odd pieces of black cloth sewn together, with two long pieces tied into a great bow on top of it. It looked daft, until she put it on, but it looked wonderful when she had put it on, a little to one side, with one ear showing, and all her hair curling up to it. And it suited the mink coat, too.

She looked a picture. Everybody we passed looked at her, and turned round for another look, too; even men with the sort of wives that it's not advisable to look round at beautiful women with—they could turn round because their wives turned round, too.

That walk round Edgware was like a triumph. The more people looked the lovelier Helen got. That fur coat, and that little hat, and the knowledge of just how lovely she looked in that fur coat and that hat, made her look lovelier than she'd ever been, and that's saying a lot. I was sorry as she was when it got dusk and, finally, so dark that people could only see us in the odd patches of brilliantly lighted shop windows, and they couldn't see how beautiful she was far enough away to get a proper look at her.

I was sorry enough at first, and then glad, for soon we didn't bother about the lighted streets and just went for a long walk over towards Canon's Park, and Helen gradually stopped being a queen and began walking half a step in front of me with her face turned up to mine, like I was a king, right enough, but she'd forgotten she was a queen.

I've never felt happier in my life, I don't think, than I did that birthday night of Helen's. I thought: this is great. This is being really happy. It's not hoping to be happy next week, or next month, or next year. It's being happy right now. We'll never be happier than this, walking like this down these

narrow roads, with a moon like a great sovereign lighting up all the hedges and trees and other lovers, arm in arm, walking before or behind us, or leaning against the railings where the hedges have been thinned out. We'll never be happier than this, I thought, not if I end up with six thousand a year, like Mr. Gaskell, and a big Bugatti. We'll not often be as happy. And if I end up, not with six thousand a year and a big Bugatti, but in jail, instead, I'll think of this night all the time I'm in, and all the rest of my life, and I bet at that I won't regret it.

Helen squeezed my hand. Her hand was very cool. It was cold, almost. She'd have to have some pretty good gloves, I thought, to go with that coat. She squeezed my hand, and it thrilled me as though she'd never squeezed my hand before. She whispered something I couldn't hear, and I bent my head down. She didn't repeat it, so I stroked my cheek on the great fur collar of the coat, and she kissed my nose.

"This is wonderful," she said, "isn't it?" My hand was round her waist and I gave her a big hug. "I hope," she said, looking very shy, "that you don't feel how you felt this morning."

"I do," I said seriously, "yes, I do."

She was quiet for a minute and we walked in silence; then she lifted up her face and I bent my head again, twisting it round so that her mouth was near my ear.

"I do wish you didn't," she whispered. "I do wish you wouldn't. It's my birthday, you know," she said. "It's still my birthday."

VIII

You'd have thought the way I felt so good Sunday, that I'd have felt just that much bad Monday. That's the usual way with feeling good, I've found.

But I felt good on Monday too. Helen got up with me at seven o'clock, as she used to do, and that extra hour didn't half make a difference. It was like a holiday, that extra hour, after a fortnight of getting up at six; having my breakfast ready for me, and Helen smiling across the table at me with her fur coat on for a dressing-gown. Going to work was just fun, I thought, when you could go like that.

I was in nice time at the station, and on the train I got one of the double seats by the right hand side window. That is the side I like best. I like to sit and watch the hedges and gardens and fields and houses, before the train goes underground beyond Golder's Green. I don't read my paper. I sit and watch. And this morning I sat and smoked, too. Until Saturday I'd not smoked for a fortnight, and yesterday I'd found my old pipe. When you haven't smoked for a fortnight cigarettes are no good to you. You want something with something about it. So I found my pipe and stuffed it with Virginia and sat back in the train smoking and enjoying the journey. I can't understand people who sit in the train with their noses in the paper. I never get tired of looking out of the window. Even on a journey I've never been before I like it, but on this journey that I go every day, from Edgware to the Strand, I like it better still. I like to see how the gardens are getting on. It's surprising the things you can find out about people from the way their gardens are getting on. Or not getting on. People you've never seen in your life. I like to guess at what sort of people they are. I guessed one fellow must be very fat because although his garden was always neat and tidy and well cared for in every other way, his lawn wasn't cut when there was a hot spell, and it wasn't cut very well any time. So I guessed he was very fat, and knew about it when he was pushing a mower. But one night I was late at the office I saw him in the garden when the train passed, and he was a little, thin man, half crippled so that he couldn't walk properly, and it was his wife pushing the mower.

I looked at the garden now, as the train gathered speed when we left Hendon, and the garden didn't seem to be quite as neat as usual and all the blinds were drawn, and it looked to me like somebody in that house was

dead. I wondered whether it was the crippled man or his wife. Perhaps, maybe, it was a lodger, or somebody else I hadn't seen that night I came home on a late train.

I was in the Strand at ten minutes to nine, and it was good not to have that three-quarters of an hour to kill. Killing that three-quarters of an hour was almost as bad as the getting up at six o'clock. That and the feeling so hungry at half-past twelve you could eat the cash book instead of working on till one o'clock. It didn't just stop at getting up at six o'clock, you see, travelling workman, it was the three-quarters of an hour time to kill and the feeling hungry at half-past twelve. It certainly was good, walking down the Strand at ten minutes to nine, just in nice time for work, with a pipe in my mouth curling up blue smoke into the early September sunshine. I wasn't a bit scared of going to the office. I was glad I was going to the office. I wasn't frightened of Mr. Gaskell, not me. I'm a better man than Mr. Gaskell, I thought, and how can you be frightened of a man when you're better than him? I was a better man than most of these fellows crowding along the Strand. I was a thief all right, yes. But at that I was better than most of these fellows crowding along the Strand. You put these fellows in a position when any decent man would steal—say their wives and kids starving, or something silly like that, something so bad that honesty shouldn't count—and you'd find a good many of them wouldn't have the pluck to be a thief even then, and those who did have the pluck wouldn't be smart enough to get away with it, like I was doing. Like I was doing so far, anyway. I was better than these fellows all right, and I was better than Mr. Gaskell. I wasn't frightened of him. Why should I be frightened of him? Even if he did find out about me I wasn't frightened of him. I could stand for him finding out, all right, after yesterday. There was nothing he could do to me, now, that wasn't worth having had yesterday for. Yesterday I was alive, and I bet it's not many people who're ever alive even for one day in this life. Mr. Gaskell might be, I daresay he is, but all these people hurrying along the Strand who've never been frightened of going into the office in a morning, because of what the boss might have found out, and never had a day like yesterday, they've never been alive at all, I shouldn't think, and never likely to be, I wouldn't mind betting. I bet their wives never fall for them as hard as Helen falls for me, and why should they?

"I thought it was Miss Peat won the pontoon this time," said Miss Nixon. "What're you going to buy?"

I didn't get her for a minute, then I laughed.

"Why shouldn't I be happy?" I said, taking off my things and opening the safe. "You haven't seen the beans I'm getting, and the carrots—this long, and no split ones. And you wouldn't believe my tomatoes are real." It tickles her, the way I am about my garden.

"I wouldn't believe they were real if I had to eat them," she smiles at me. She's got her coat off, but she's still got her hat on, a cheeky little thing, but it suits her all right. I don't like the way she smiles at me. She's sweet on me all right, I'm sure of that.

"My wife does," I say, "when she eats them. My wife likes them." And later on in the morning I remember to get in another one like that. Miss Nixon has been to the pictures, Saturday night and wants to know do I like Jean Harlow. She doesn't like blondes, she says. Do I like blondes?

"You don't like blondes," I say, "because you haven't seen a proper one. You should see my wife. My wife's a proper blonde. She looks grand. I like blondes all right." Miss Nixon is what you call between colours if you're like that yourself and mousy if you're not.

I feel good all right. Mr. Nolan comes nosing about the office, and I don't mind that. And Mr. Gaskell sends for me, and I don't mind that. He wants to know how my cash is, because he's paid one or two small accounts I usually pay in cash; he's paid them with cheques of his own, and he wants me to draw a cheque to cover him—he often pays small accounts himself, because he's one of these "do it now" men, and if anybody so much as mentions an account he's got his own cheque book out before you can say Jack Robinson—especially if there's anybody else looking on. So he wants me to draw a cheque to cover him, and as I won't need as much cash as I asked for on Friday, he says I'd better re-bank say ten pounds.

All right, I think, that's good. That suits me, I think. I've been thinking during the morning that I may as well settle up the house and furniture instalments. I've been reckoning up what I should have had by now if he'd given me that five pounds a week when I asked him, and I'm still five pounds short, taking off the amount I've had. If I'm going to have five pounds a week from him I'm going to have five pounds a week from him. I can't take it every week, I've got to take it as the best time comes along for taking it, and this is the best time of all, when the re-banking has to be done anyway, and not because I've wangled it. I think all this, standing right over him, whilst he sits staring at my subsidiary cash book.

He's got his hands at the sides of the book, with the two big solitaires on his fingers, and the one that's on the hand that's in the sunlight keeps

shooting out streaks of light. It must be worth hundreds of pounds, that one stone alone. And his suit probably dropped him fifteen guineas. You should see how it fits over the shoulders, even as he's bent forward, like he is now, you can see that it fits, that that suit has class. Someday I'm going to have a suit like that, and I guess I'll look different in it than he does, too. I'm going to have a suit like that if I'm not found out, anyway. He might find me out. He might find me out over this very five pounds I'm planning to take now, as I stand over him. But am I scared? I am not scared.

He raises one hand, filling the room with streaks of light from the diamond—it is the hand near the window he has raised—and he carelessly wipes the lapels of his jacket, making a little wind to blow some of the cigar ash away. He is an untidy smoker.

"You'd better re-bank ten pounds then," he says. Does he think I don't know I'd better re-bank ten pounds? I've been doing it for three years, now, and until I asked for that advance, and when Minshull was found out, he'd never even seen the subsidiary cash book. He sits there telling me to do what I've been doing for three years as though it's something difficult he's thought out all on his own. But I'm going to re-bank the ten pounds all right, and part of it's going to be one of the sales agent's cheques. I'm going to have five pounds a week whether he gives it me or not, and if I'm going to have five pounds a week, I may as well have five pounds a week up to date, not be five pounds behind. If it was wages he was paying me, as it should be, I wouldn't be five pounds behind with that, would I? So I'm not going to be five pounds behind now.

"Yes," I say, looking down into his face, right into his eyes. "Yes. I'd better re-bank ten pounds." I don't say "sir." I'm not going to say "sir," any more. You don't say "sir" to a man when you're better than he is, so I'm not going to say "sir" to him any more. "Yes," I say. "Yes, I'd better re-bank ten pounds." And he gives me the subsidiary cash book back and I leave the office, and I walk out slower than I usually do, and I'm not glad or anything when I shut the door behind me. Usually I am glad when I shut the door behind me. Everybody is. It's funny to see the way we all blow a sigh of relief when we shut that door behind us. But I don't blow a sigh of relief at all. I feel real good, and I don't care if he sends for me again the very next minute.

I feel good at lunch time, too. I've got twelve shillings in my pocket, what's left of my wages to last me the week and, somehow, to make the weekly payments I've written to the Royal and building society about. I'm not going to make any weekly payments, now, because I'm going to settle

up with them, tomorrow or Wednesday, when the sales agents' cheques come in, and I re-bank. So that twelve shillings, instead of not being enough for me, is more than I need. Instead of being short I'm flush. So I walk out at lunch time feeling good. This is how I've dreamed about, having more in my pocket than I need. No roll and butter today. I can have my steak pudding and chips again. I can have beef, cabbage, baked potatoes and a pudding as well, if I want. And that is just what I do want. In fact, I'm not going to an ordinary tea-house again, like I usually do. I'm going to the Corner House, like I did after I took that eight pounds three shillings rebate. It was a celebration, then. But it isn't a celebration, now, because now I'm getting five pounds a week regularly I can afford to eat in the Corner House, with the band playing all the latest rags, and proper tunes, too.

I got a table on the ground floor, because Helen and I had been on the ground floor that night we had tea before going to get the new furniture. I couldn't get near the table we had then, because it was pretty crowded, there, but I could see it from where I sat. I could see where Helen had sat. There was another girl there now, about Helen's age. A good looker, too, making a great show of smiling, because she had very nice teeth, and smoking. She had a fur coat on, but it wasn't a patch on Helen's. The girl herself wasn't a patch on Helen. She was a bit of all right, mind you, but she couldn't hold a candle to Helen. Sometimes, when there was a bit of a lull in the noise of talking and the clatter of pots and things, I could hear her laugh and say something. She had a nice voice, and spoke like you hear women on the wireless. She was educated, all right. She was pretty posh, no doubt about that. But even so she hadn't got Helen's style. I don't care if she was a society girl, she still hadn't got Helen's class.

Where I was sitting we had waiters. I liked that. It was something like, to sit here being served by a waiter and pay the few extra pence for a meal that makes all the difference between being just something that'll keep you from feeling hungry all afternoon and being a proper meal that's a treat to eat. It was a treat to eat. It was roast beef, and you hadn't to push half of it to the side of your plate. You could eat all of it. I always say that the cheapest things are usually what you have to pay a fair price for, and meals are included. I ate all that beef and cabbage and baked potatoes, and I enjoyed every mouthful. In future, I thought, I'll always have a proper meal like this. If I can't afford it every day then I'll do without altogether one day and have a proper meal like this the other. And then I thought that it wasn't very likely I should have to do without it at all, in future, and that made me feel good.

I was just finishing my coffee when the girl sitting in Helen's place stood up. She was with a man. I hadn't seen him before, because of the people in between us, but now I saw him move forward and pull back her chair and help her with her coat and pick up her bag and a paper. He did it all so naturally, too, he didn't look a fool, like I would have looked, if I'd done it. I bet he was educated, too. I just managed to hear a few words of what he was saying to her then, and he was educated, all right. He was tall, and slender, and wearing a very good suit. He wasn't as tall as me, though, and I'm not slender, I'm pretty beefy. They made a good couple, but educated or not they didn't make as good a couple as Helen and me. People didn't look at them as they walked out, like they looked at Helen and me.

It was five minutes to two when I'd finished my coffee, but I didn't hurry at that. I was feeling too pleased with myself to hurry. It wasn't that I was the least bit frightened of going back to the office. I wasn't. I just wasn't going to hurry. I smoked a pipe, before I called for my check, and when I left that table I put a sixpenny piece under my plate. I've always wanted to leave a sixpenny piece under my plate, and that's just what I did.

It took me twelve minutes to walk back to the office, I was so full and comfortable and happy. I was a quarter of an hour late, and I didn't care a damn.

I wasn't drunk when I got home, not by long chalks. I can carry my drink with anybody. But I'd not had a glass of beer for a month, and that afternoon I'd had to go out to a place off the Barbican to see a firm we buy coats from about some mistakes in their invoices, and the fellow who runs this place—I forget his name—he's so pleased when I have to admit that they're right and we're wrong, that he takes me out for a drink. It was a sort of club—a rum basement place—the last sort of a place you'd expect to see in the City, anyway. I only had four glasses of beer, but on top of such a good meal, and being so happy anyway, I suppose it made me merrier than four glasses of beer would usually.

I wasn't drunk, though. I wasn't even drunk enough for Helen to notice it at all, until she noticed my breath. She just stood in front of the fire and twisted her hands and looked tragic.

"Hello," I said, seeing how she was, "what's up?"

"I'm—you know." There were dark rings under her eyes and her complexion was blotchy, now I came to look at her closely. "There's nothing doing for a bit now," she said. "I'm sorry."

"You ass," I said, and kissed her. I wasn't sorry—not at first, anyway. I was glad. It was a miracle to me, the way everything kept being all right. You'd have thought it impossible, but it wasn't impossible, and everything kept on being all right. That sobered me up nicely. I wasn't feeling even merry, now. I was just feeling that quiet sort of happiness I'd had all day. I'd be able to love her now, I thought, as I'd wanted to yesterday. I'd show her it wasn't just because she was like she'd been since we'd come here, that I'd loved her. I loved her anyway.

So I made a rare fuss of her. I cleared the tea things and washed up. She didn't want to let me but I made her. I tidied up the room then. I swept up the hearth, and burnt my finger and thumb when I tried to pull away the guard to sweep the cinders under the grate. Helen wanted to kiss them better, but I said no, wait a minute, I knew something better even than her kisses, and I went into the bathroom and rubbed soap on to the blisters that had come, and then when she did kiss them she wished she hadn't. That started off the fun, and we had a real daft night. I made her lie on the settee, with a blanket round her and a hot water bottle—she didn't need all that, really, even though it was her first day—but I wanted to fuss her. I read her the evening paper, reading out the maddest things. Reading out real things, you know, for a bit, so's she wouldn't suspect, and then working my own stuff in when she wasn't expecting it. What with one thing and another it was ten o'clock before we knew where we were.

"I know," I said. "We'll have an early night. You need one anyway, and I want one." So I made cocoa for supper, making Helen's all with milk. She enjoyed it. "It'll make you sleep," I said. And it did make her sleep. She was asleep before I got in bed myself. I was acting the goat in front of the mirror and when I didn't hear her laugh I wondered what was the matter—and there she was, fast asleep.

I turned out the light and crept into bed, and expected to be asleep myself in next to no time, but I lay in bed wide awake, and the longer I lay the wider awake I became. I could hear the alarm clock ticking away, and Helen's steady breathing, but not another thing. I lay for hours like that. I don't know whether it was because I'd got out of the habit of going to sleep early—I guess I hadn't been asleep before two o'clock more than twice in a month—or whether it was the beer I'd had. It was awful. I kept counting sheep, and counting numbers up to thousands and reciting the alphabet backwards, and it didn't do any good. It was as though my body was tired enough, but not my mind. My mind got busier and busier. All manner of things kept whizzing round inside my mind, until I was nearly dizzy with

them. I fairly ached with tiredness, but these things in my mind kept up a rare old racket. I knew that most of them had something to do with stealing that money, and I remember having wit enough to think that if that was my conscience carrying on it was a pretty mean way of tackling the job, setting on me in the middle of the night when I was tired out and couldn't reason myself into sanity again.

After a bit I found my stomach was aching, and I wondered if I'd eaten something that didn't agree with me, and I tried to remember what I'd eaten all day, but my mind was in such a pelt I couldn't think clearly of anything. I knew I'd lunched in the Strand Corner House, but what I'd had I couldn't for the life of me think. I remembered leaving that sixpence, right enough. I could remember that only too well. It didn't seem half so good to me now, lying in bed with my eyes and body prickling and aching and my head splitting. It didn't seem good at all. It was all very well, I thought, going round leaving sixpences under plates, when they were sixpences I'd stolen from somebody else. Anybody could do that, I thought. That was how the cheapest sneak-thief carried on—chucking away the money he'd stolen; chucking it away right and left. That sixpence worried me. The meal I'd had in the Corner House worried me, too, and going down on the late train, and those drinks. I'd paid for two of those drinks. The whole day I'd spent worried me. I wasn't happy about it any more. I didn't feel better than Mr. Gaskell any more. That was a fine way of showing I was better than Mr. Gaskell, I thought, living nice and easily on his money. Not much principle about that, it seemed to me. Getting a home for Helen and me, yes. Buying Helen a fur coat, yes. But feeding in the Corner House and leaving sixpence under the plate and all that sort of thing, no.

I felt bad all right. I felt so bad I tossed and turned until I nearly woke Helen up. I'd have taken some aspirin, if I'd known where there was any. I've never taken aspirin in my life—a girl's game, if you ask me—but I'd have got up and taken aspirin if I'd known where to find it. I tossed and turned, and put one hand on the iron beam of the bed until it was cold enough to put on my forehead. I kept turning the pillow over and over and groaning and swearing under my breath. I felt bad all right.

And then suddenly I got an idea, and I felt a lot better. That money I'd spent yesterday had been what was left of my wages; so long as I didn't take any of the money I was going to have when I re-banked, as I'd meant to, it wouldn't be so bad. I knew that in the long run it didn't make any difference whether money was paid out of my wages or out of what I took from the firm, but what I could do was this: I could reckon up how much I spend on

myself and meals and fares and things anyway, whether I'm taking money from the firm or not—that is, how much of my three pounds a week is spent on myself—and then I could spend just that and no more on myself this week, and every other week. But this week certainly.

That didn't take much reckoning up. Sixteen shillings was always supposed to clear me for fares, lunches, smokes, and an occasional drink; that was when we had been at Camberwell. Since we'd come to Edgware and the fares were more I'd tried to manage on a pound. I hadn't spent a pound this Monday, of course, so that if I managed on the money I had left, without using any of the money I was going to take when I re-banked—without using it, I mean, on fares, lunches, smokes or drinks—I was only spending my wages. The money I'd chucked away today hadn't been Mr. Gaskell's at all, but only the money that was to carry me through the rest of the week.

I liked that. The more I thought about it the more I liked it. I was always going to do that. I'd give sixpenny tips when I felt like it, and I'd go in the Corner House when I felt like it, and I'd do without something else to make up for it. I'd stop drinking altogether, for one thing. It's a daft game, drinking, anyway. I'd cut down my smoking. I knew what I'd do, by Jove!—I'd travel workman. I'd travel workman regularly. I'd travel workman all winter. I'd travel workman tomorrow. Yes—tomorrow.

I was out of bed like the shot from a gun. I got hold of the alarm clock and walked to the window with it, trying to read the time by moonlight—if I switched on the light it might waken Helen, if she happened to be lying with her face to the light. The moonlight wasn't very clear. I could see the time; twenty past two, but I couldn't see the little alarm dial. I struck a match, and altered the alarm finger from seven o'clock to six. That was fine, altering the finger from seven to six. It was twenty past two now, but I was going to get up at six o'clock. I looked at myself in the dressing-table mirror, in the light of the match that was beginning to hurt me where I had been blistered at the grate. I looked queer in that glass. I didn't half look queer. My hair was all stuck up in bunches, and the cricket shirt I still wore for a pyjama coat was pulled lop-sided. I looked a case. But I was satisfied, anyway.

I blew out the match, quickly, dropped it carefully on the oilcloth where I knew there was no rug, and stood until the little red glow had gone—I'd nothing on my feet so I couldn't put my foot on it. Then I went to bed, and I was asleep before I knew my head was on the pillow.

Perhaps you've seen a good lad at Blackfriars—or Shepherd's Bush, maybe, or Wembley—and he's got a packet in the first few rounds. Perhaps you've seen the way he comes up for more when the bell rings for the new round, and everybody's cheered his pluck, and the second has flickered a towel. You've cheered his pluck, heartily enough, but it's not been pluck at all. He's been punch drunk.

And that's how I was the Tuesday morning after that Monday. I must have got up when the alarm bell rang, and got washed and shaved and dressed and had my breakfast, but honest to God I don't remember a thing about it. I didn't awaken up until I'd shut the door behind me and the coldest morning I've ever known nearly bowled me off the door step. By gosh, it was cold. I'd got my raincoat over my arm, and I didn't waste any time getting it on. It might have been tissue paper for all the protection it was against that wind. And it was still dark enough for the few windows that had light behind them to look like fairyland. And most of the windows didn't even have a light behind them yet. It might have been midnight for all the people sleeping in those houses knew about it.

All right, I thought. All right. Sleep your lives away if you like. You do nothing with them, anyway, so sleep them away. Look at me, I thought, I could be just wriggling my toes in the warm bed, now, and thinking about getting up, instead of being up and out and on my way to the train. But there's something about me.

I kept that up until I'd passed the estate office and got out on to the main road, but I wasn't half cold, and as soon as I was away from that estate I started in to curse myself for a fool. I didn't feel so brave, now, I was cold, and tired, and fed up. And I was a bit scared too.

And the nearer I got to town the more I was scared. I sat in that train, rattling along towards town, and I felt—empty. That was how I felt, empty. I felt there was only part of me there, and that wasn't the bravest part, by a long way.

When I got off at Strand I was real glad of that three quarter of an hour's wait. There was a thin drizzle, now, and you couldn't imagine a more miserable morning, but I was glad I hadn't to go straight to the office.

I went up on to the Charing Cross station. The main line station. It would be a good idea, I thought, to park down in the waiting-room there, as it was such an awful morning. It was a good idea, sure enough, but about six hundred other people had had that good idea, too, and they'd got there first. There were so many people in that waiting-room that people were standing

up leaning on each other, like you sometimes have to do on the tubes at the rush hour.

That was no good, I thought. I walked back down the approach, and I crossed over the road, and then I got another good idea. The post office there opens early, and it's warm in there. And this time I was lucky. There were only one or two people inside, and I got one of the sections for writing letters and turned an official form upside down and started pretending to write a letter on the blank side.

I stood in that post office opposite Charing Cross station pretending to write a letter on the blank side of an official form for half an hour, until it was time to go to the office, and it was all right.

I'd only intended taking about five pounds of the money I was re-banking, but when Wednesday came and I began to think about it, I found that was all wrong. I must take as near the ten pounds as I could get. That was policy. The whole risk in this wangling that I was doing was a matter of averages. I could do it once and, a thousand to one, get away with it. Do it twice and maybe the chances were reduced to a hundred to one, and more than that I was taking real risks.

Two pounds a week is a hundred pounds a year. I might take that money in ten amounts of ten pounds each and get away with it. I might take that money in twenty instalments of five pounds each, but the risk was not twice as great. It was fifty times as great.

What I had to do, then, was to take as much as possible each time I took anything at all, and if it was more than the amount I was supposed to have to make up my wages to five pounds I would have to count that as money in advance, and wait until that had gone before I took any more. That was obvious.

So I changed my mind about the cheque for five guineas, that was in the agent's cheques that Wednesday morning, and I took a cheque for eight pounds fifteen. That was the nearest to ten pounds I could get.

I made out the paying-in book, the ten pounds on a separate paying-in slip, and the agent's cheques on another, and then when I went into the General Office for Peterson, the pimply-faced correspondence clerk, who comes with me to the bank since Mr. Gaskell said I hadn't to go alone, I find he's gone out. When Peterson is out I go with old Parker, but this time old

Parker is out, too; and young Potter, the only other fellow on the office staff, is away ill.

I don't know quite what to do about that. I'm certainly not going on my own. It seems silly taking the office boy, and sillier still taking one of the girls—a great strapping chap like me. They wouldn't be much help if anybody tried to grab the money, and still less if I took a jump with it myself. The whole thing was silly, anyway, so I thought I'd tell the manager and let him decide. He's the manager, so he'd better manage.

I knocked on his door and walked in. He glared up at me. He's never forgiven me for going to Mr. Gaskell about that rise, and starting the old man off on all this supervision. It's made it worse for him, I can tell. If it hadn't made it worse for him, if Mr. Gaskell wasn't put out with him about it, Nolan would have had me fired by now.

I stared at him. "The bank," I say, jerking out what I have to say in a few main words, like he does to me. "Peterson's out. Mr. Parker's out. Potter's away. Who's to go with me?"

"Oh," he says, "the bank!" He looks a bit less grey, now. "Any cash? Re-banking?"

"Yes," I say, feeling a bit funny inside.

He pulls out his own cheque book from his breast pocket. "Good," he says. "Change me a pound. I've happened to come out without any money."

I breathe a sigh of relief. That agent's cheque is for eight pounds fifteen shillings, so changing his cheque for a pound doesn't mess everything up.

He gives it to me. "Get somebody from the warehouse," he says—"no. Better not do that. Miss Nixon'll do. Take Miss Nixon."

I'm not very pleased at that, but Miss Nixon, she is. It's a bit of a jaunt, for her, coming out to the bank with me. But I wish it had been one of the other girls. Miss Nixon's too glad to come out with me for me to be very pleased about it.

"Why me?" she says, as we walk down the steps and out into the street. "What can I do if anybody tries to steal the money?"

"What can you do if I steal the money?" I say, but she doesn't see it. She doesn't know that's more the reason why I can't go to the bank alone than because anybody might attack me.

Miss Nixon giggled. "We'll both steal it," she said. "Shall we?"

I was glad when we got to the bank. We bank at the Strand branch, although our account is really at head office, and it's only a hundred yards away, but it seemed longer than that. I put the three books on the counter—there were a lot of collections that day, and we have a separate paying-in book for each type of deposit—and pushed the money across to the teller; and did my best to answer all the questions Miss Nixon asked. Tormenting me, in her way. She's a forward little minx, if you ask me. On the way back she wanted me to take her for a cup of coffee. She pretended to think I was afraid of taking the time, when I wouldn't. But I wasn't going to fall for that. I didn't take her for a coffee because I didn't want to take her for a coffee. When we passed Lyons she tried to pull me in, or pretended to pull me in. She got hold of my arm and tugged, but she couldn't budge me, of course. People who were passing grinned at us.

"My!" she said, when she saw that was no use. "You are strong!" She slipped her arm through mine. I'd got the three paying-in books under my arm, but I wouldn't move them to the other arm; she might think I wanted her to keep it there. We walked along like that for a few yards, and I hoped nobody from the office would see us. I was relieved when we reached the corner and she took her arm away. I was more relieved still when we got back in the office.

I'd got the eight pounds fifteen in an envelope in my inside pocket. At lunch time, I thought, I'd get postal orders to send to the furniture people and the building society. I'd write the letters in the post office and send them off. They'd get them by the late afternoon post. I'd have plenty of time to do it because I was down to roll and butter again now, making up for Monday. I put my hand against the outside of my jacket pocket and felt the envelope with the notes in. Miss Nixon had her back to me and young Potter was away, so I could safely do that.

There was a knock on the door and it opened. The office boy stood there. He looked at me, and then looked at somebody evidently waiting outside in the general office, and then nodded to me and gave a silly little snigger.

Two policemen walked in. One was an inspector. One was a constable. The inspector had his hat on, but the constable had taken his off; he was holding his helmet in front of him, as though it was a trophy he was going to present to somebody. They came to the side of my desk and looked down at me. I wanted to get up, but I couldn't get up. I wished the office boy would close that door, and in a moment he did. Miss Nixon was still there, though. I supposed she'd be looking round, staring at us.

The inspector said my name, and I couldn't speak because my throat was so dry. I nodded, and my throat was so dry that I had to hang my head down while I swallowed. I despised myself, being knocked out like this. If I took a proper grip on myself I might be able to do something, I thought; after all I didn't know why they were here. But I couldn't get a proper grip on myself. There was that emptiness again, in my back this time. As though I'd no backbone. I supposed they'd waited until I came from the bank to make sure I'd have the money on me. I was a fool to keep the money on me. I should have had it in an envelope and posted it to an accommodation address. I could have posted it on my way to the bank. A bit late to think of that, now, with the money in that envelope in my inside pocket.

The inspector had said something to the constable, and the constable's hand went inside his uniform. I swear I expected him to pull out a pair of handcuffs. What he did pull out was a bank paying-in book. He gave it to the inspector and the inspector gave it to me.

"Yours?" he asked.

I turned over the counterfoils. "Yes," I said, finding my voice. My throat was that dry I didn't recognize it as my voice at all. "The firm's."

"It was found in the Strand, an hour ago," he said. "Is it all right?"

I could get on my feet, now. "Yes," I said.

He looked at me. Now I came to think of it, it was funny for these two policemen to be here like this just over a paying-in book that had been dropped in the street. Two policemen, ordinary policemen, perhaps, because policemen always seem to do everything in twos, but one of these was an inspector. He put out his hand, and I gave him the book back. He opened it at the last counterfoil; the counterfoil for the morning's banking.

"Sure that's right?"

"Yes," I said.

"Look closely. Look at the other counterfoils. They've got a bank stamp on, this one hasn't."

I could have laughed. "That's all right," I said. "You see we take three in at a time and occasionally they do miss one. We don't bother about it. We get statements from the bank every week, so we can't go wrong. See: if you'll wait a minute whilst I run through one of the other books I'll show you one or two where that's happened, missing stamping them."

The inspector looked disappointed. He thought he'd hit on something then.

"Or perhaps you'd like to see the manager?" I asked, "or the managing director?" I hoped he wouldn't, because I didn't want Mr. Gaskell to know that I'd lost the paying-in book in the Strand—that was going out with blasted Miss Nixon.

"No. If you're sure it's all right. I thought we'd better come and see you right away. Ordinarily we'd have just sent it in to the office, but when I saw that counterfoil unstamped I thought perhaps the money had been in it when it had been dropped. If you're sure it's all right we'll get along then."

I am sure it's all right, and I tell him so. I'm that relieved I want to give them tips, but you can't tip an inspector, surely. You start hinting. "If we've caused any inconvenience."

"That's all right, sir," he says, a little stiffly. "If you care to contribute towards the sports fund. . . ."

I think it's the sports fund. It's some fund anyway. I am too excited and relieved to know, exactly.

These weekly statements we get from the bank are checked with the cash book and filed in a bank folder. The bank folder, with these machined weekly statements, is the same as the old-fashioned pass book, like they had before the banks used the machines.

Since old Gaskell got on the war-path I've had to give these bank statements to him, and he passes them back to me to be checked when he's looked at them. That is on a Tuesday morning.

This Tuesday morning after the policemen found the paying-in book the bank statement hadn't been on his desk five minutes before he was sending for me in a great tear.

"Ah!" he says, when I came into the office. I shut the door after me. "Ah! Come here. Just explain this." He's got the week's bank statement in front of him—three machined sheets; and he turns to the second sheet and points to the banking of ten pounds I'd made the previous Wednesday. It's something in my knees goes empty, this time. And my brain. I stare at the sheet for quite a while, before I see what he means.

You know what these bank statements are usually like, with the figures of payments and withdrawals all down one side in two separate columns,

and against these figures are typed the cheque numbers, in the case of withdrawals, and "cash" or "cheques" in the case of deposits. Well our statements are a bit different, because we actually pay into a collection account—the account in the Strand—instead of into the City office. And when you pay into a collection account they type, not "cash" or "cheques," but the name of the branch: "Strand." But just on this one day, for this particular payment of ten pounds, the machinist has omitted to put "Strand" and has put "Cash and Cheques." It's a mistake, really, a typing mistake. The machinist is so used to typing "Cash and Cheques," and not the name of the branch, that that's what she's done. She's probably not noticed it, or even if she's noticed it she wouldn't do another sheet just for that. The figures are all right. It's hardly a mistake at all, from the bank's point of view.

But from my point of view it's hell. I'm supposed to have banked ten pounds cash on that day, and there in the pass book it says "Cash and Cheques." It would just have to be that one transaction out of about six hundred that the mistake should happen with. It's not a six hundred to one chance, because mistakes like that don't happen every week. It's a ten thousand to one chance. And this is the one chance.

"Well," says Mr. Gaskell. "Well? What about it? What about it? What about it?" He rings for Mr. Nolan. "Don't stand there like a stuffed dummy, damn you, explain it, explain it, explain it!"

I can explain it all right. I can explain that instead of paying into the bank ten pounds cash I've substituted a cheque for most of the cash. I can explain that, right enough. He'll like that a lot, particularly when he finds that the cash has gone into my pocket.

"It's a mistake," I say. It is a mistake, too, that the machinist has typed "Cash and Cheques" instead of "Strand," but that's not going to interest him any.

"You bet it's a mistake," he says. "Where the hell's that man!" And he rings for Nolan again, his ears and the back of his neck getting red with anger. I can see them getting red as I stand over him. The bald patch on top of his head, too. Even that is getting red. If I picked up that heavy ebony ruler on the desk, there, and gave him one good crack over that bald spot, it would get properly red, then. It would just about settle him. Perhaps Nolan is out and I could put Mr. Gaskell out with the ebony ruler and just walk back into my own office and then when he is found swear that he was all right when I left him. I'd have to wipe the ruler with a handkerchief or something, and put it back on the desk.

I'd be found out though. If they couldn't prove I'd done it they'd be suspicious enough to go through my books carefully enough to find something. That wouldn't do at all. It would have to be some way that could look like suicide. I once read of a man who cut another man's throat and stuck the razor in the dead man's hand before what do you call it set in—before his hand began to go rigid, I mean. So when the police saw the razor stuck so hard they thought it was suicide. That should be all right, if they put it in a book.

But I'm not going to do anything like that, of course. I'll risk going to jail, but I'm not going to risk swinging. I'm just thinking like this to keep a grip on myself. And I am getting a grip on myself, now. I can feel I've got knees, now. I can feel I've got a brain. I can't think with it properly, but I've enough control over it to get a grip on myself with.

Mr. Gaskell is just going to ask me something else, but I hear Mr. Nolan's tap on the door and I go and open it. Nolan comes in all aflutter. You'd think it was he who's paid cheques into the bank instead of cash. He's in such a state of nerves that I begin to feel a lot better myself. If he's like that when he's done nothing surely I can go pretty weak when I've got something to go weak about?

"Cash and cheques you see," shouts Mr. Gaskell, showing him the bank sheet. "What the devil does it mean—cheques? That's supposed to be the cash re-banking. Cash. Not cash and cheques."

"Well I—I didn't think you'd mind that, sir," Nolan stammered, and Mr. Gaskell looked at him surprised. Mr. Gaskell didn't look at him half as surprised as I did, though. "I'd happened to come down without any change. Any money. So I put a cheque for a pound in the cash re-banking. I didn't think you'd mind."

There was nothing said for about half a minute. I'd forgotten all about that pound cheque of Nolan's. Mr. Gaskell was evidently taken aback.

"Oh!" he said, "oh!" He was getting redder in the face—he'd been getting ready to curse me, and this didn't suit him a bit. My brain began working like mad, then: if only I could think of some way that he could still curse me, or somebody, he'd probably be satisfied and not look into it any further.

"I told you it was a mistake," I said, and it worked like a charm.

"Mistake!" he bellowed. "What are you talking about, a mistake?"

I pointed out that the machinist should have typed "Strand" on the bank sheet, and I reckoned that was as good an opportunity to bawl me out as he'd ever had—a daft thing to say, at a time like this. But instead of cursing me he started cursing the bank. It's not often I've been more surprised than I was then, at the way he carried on about that. He got on the 'phone to the head office and carried on to them as though they'd cheated him out of a thousand pounds. The things he said about "irregularity of description," as he called it, and the way it "inconvenienced our accountancy system" had to be heard to be believed.

"Fools," he said, as he slammed the receiver back. "Pampered, incompetent idiots. Too damned busy getting the bank closed for half-past three to pay proper attention to what they're doing."

He had us standing there a good fifteen minutes whilst he explained what a lot of trade was lost through banks closing at half-past three. Trade isn't lost through banks closing at half-past three of course, and I could have told him why, but just then I'd have agreed with him if he'd said the moon was made of green cheese.

He pushed the cigarettes across to Nolan, when we went, and gave me the bank sheets without even looking at them again.

But I didn't get away with it quite so easily as I'd thought.

The next Tuesday when I handed the week's bank sheets to Mr. Gaskell again he waved one hand in that way he has when he wants me to stop by the side of his desk. He glanced at the sheets, and I noticed he looked at the previous week's re-banking. It had "Strand" typed against it this time, but in any case it was all cash so I didn't mind.

"It's a nuisance," he said—quite mildly for him, "the bank sending in the sheets like this. We've no means of telling whether the bankings are cash or cheques or what, have we?"

"No," I said.

"I think," he said, "that we'd better stop this business of re-banking the surplus cash. I don't like it. I can't think why we do it, at all. Why don't we draw a cheque for the previous week's payments, like other firms do?"

I told him why. That sometimes we only needed ten pounds in hand and sometimes thirty. If we did it the more usual way we'd have to keep thirty in

hand all the time. He listened as though I knew what I was talking about, and that's a change.

"But these re-bankings," he said. "We can't be sure they're all cash. Any cheques can be included in place of cash, can't they?"

It occurred to me that he knew what I'd been doing and was playing me up, seeing how far I'd go. I wasn't a bit scared now though. "Yes," I said.

"There's nothing to prevent it?"

"Only the certainty of being discovered by the auditors, and probably sooner." I thought I'd give him as good as I was getting. "I can substitute almost any cheques if I want. I can alter the books so that only the auditors find out—unless you have every figure I write down checked." I could tell then, by the way he looked up at me, talking like that, that he wasn't playing me up.

He grunted. He stared at me and stared at his blotting pad and turned one of his rings round and round on his finger. He picked a piece of paper up off his desk, read it, screwed it up, and threw it into the waste paper basket.

"We'll stop that re-banking," he said. "I don't like us having a large cash balance all the time, but I don't like that re-banking. We'll stop it. In future we'll keep a balance of thirty pounds, and every week you'll draw a cheque for the amount you've spent the previous week, and bring the cash book in with you to me, when you bring the cheque for me to sign. That'll do."

"Very good," I said, as though I was bored with all these changes, and walked out of the office.

IX

I know when I'm beat, I thought, and I'm beaten now.

I thought that for two months.

Mr. Gaskell wouldn't give me five pounds a week and I said I'd have five pounds a week and for five months I had five pounds a week. And then Mr. Gaskell stopped up the last leak in the system and I just couldn't get my five pounds a week any more.

If I'd just been being stubborn about that five pounds a week, if my taking the firm's money had been half as much a matter of principle as I thought, that stopping of the weekly cash re-banked would have been the end of me as a thief.

But I'd been taking money because I needed it. And by the beginning of December I needed it as much as ever I'd needed it. I was as much behind with the building society and the furniture people as I'd been in September. Helen had bought me a five guinea overcoat for my birthday—I'd needed the coat, goodness knows; my other one was four years old and in such a state that I was wearing my thin raincoat in November sooner than put it on. But Helen had got into the habit of spending a bit more on everything and, as I say, by the beginning of December I needed money as much as ever.

I started drinking and smoking again. I'd cut out drinking and smoking altogether, but I started again, and I was fed up to the teeth about travelling workman. For a long time I'd not minded a bit travelling workman. I'd got a kick out of it. If you think you know London and you want to find out some of the things you don't, you want to travel down to town workman for a bit, and have an hour or so to kill early in a morning. Some of the girls who kill time on the bridge over the pond in St. James's Park, feeding part of their lunches to the ducks and gulls, can do almost anything with those birds. And that's not all there is to see in St. James's early in a morning. I've seen Stanley Baldwin and other big noises taking a quick morning stroll. I've seen heaps of other people who aren't big noises not taking strolls—although the Green Park is the place for that. I've wandered round the palace itself, and stood outside the barrack room—I don't know why the Guards have never challenged me, when I've walked past them. I've had lots of fun in lots of ways, travelling workman, but now I was travelling workman

because I had to travel workman, there was no fun left in it. I was fed up to the teeth.

And then one Sunday morning when Helen had brought my breakfast in on the tray she clapped her hands and said: "Just fancy! Only three weeks to Christmas!" and I said yes, just fancy; and she began to get all excited about it. She'd got it firmly fixed in her mind that this was to be our best Christmas. I think she'd noticed I'd been getting a bit tight again, and I suppose she thought I was saving up.

And after breakfast when I got out into the garden I really began to think about it. It's a funny thing, but when I get a spade in my hand and the smell of soil in my nose, especially when it's winter, I can think about things almost without thinking of them, if you know what I mean. I mean I just go on digging and thinking what grand hearts those cabbages have got and what beauties the cauliflowers are and how I wish I could afford some basic slag for this soil—heavy isn't the word for it, especially now, after all this rain—and I find myself thinking of things better than I ever do if I really settle down to think about them.

I was clearing all the beds and digging the soil over. I'd got an enormous pile of rotted manure, and another pile of weeds and stuff that would rot all right in the ground, without having to be rotted first, and two tin baths full of horse manure. Now the summer was over it was possible to get horse manure again, and I'd been getting a lot lately. I was digging all this stuff in and thinking how grand it would be, when I dug over this soil in the spring and it was all blackened and enriched by it. And with another part of my mind altogether I was thinking of the only way I could get money, now, from the firm, and how dangerous it was to get it. I wasn't weighing up whether it was worth the risk, because I knew it wasn't worth the risk, and that I was going to do it anyway. And I knew I was going to do it because I liked living as we were living now and I hated living as we had lived at Camberwell.

It amounts to this, I thought, as I kept shifting my feet in the sodden soil, trying to get a firm stand over each trench I was digging. I'd sooner live for a few months at the rate of five pounds a week than for all my life at three pounds a week. On five pounds a week you're alive; and on three pounds a week you're worse than dead. I'm not going back to three pounds a week whatever happens, because I can't live on three pounds a week. I'll go back to nothing at all, first, and a spell of prison in the bargain. I may be a fool and, well, if I am that's the sort of fool I am.

But that doesn't alter the fact that the risk I'm going to take is out of all proportion to what I'm going to get out of it. And it means altering cheques, and you can bet I don't like that. Altering cheques is a lot more serious than anything I've done before. It's not a matter of the amount of money you've taken, when you're standing in front of a judge. You can take a hundred pounds, and if you've simply taken it out of the safe and vanished you'll perhaps only get three months when you're caught. But alter a cheque, if it's only for ten pounds, and your sentence is likely to be counted in years. At least, that's how I make it out to be, from reading about these cases in the paper.

I'd thought about this new way of getting money for weeks, now, but I'd not really meant to do it. I just wanted the satisfaction of finding out a way of getting past Mr. Gaskell.

It was complicated, but the main idea of it was this:

I could write a cheque out for my cash for the sum of, say, eight pounds odd—I could only do it weeks we'd spent little cash. When I'd got it signed I'd alter it to eighteen pounds odd. That would be easy, of course; you can easily leave sufficient space in between the words eight and pounds to insert three letters. It would be harder with other amounts, because the other amounts would have to have four letters inserted, but I reckoned I could make the amount come to eight pounds, with a bit of wangling, often enough for what I wanted. I'd put a one in front of the figures, too, and then that would be all right. I recognized that that part of it was almost fool-proof; I only disliked it because I disliked altering cheques. I don't know why, but it seemed so much worse than altering books. But altering cheques has one advantage—when the cheques are passed through the bank they come back to you, and you can bet once I got my hands on them there was going to be no evidence of me altering cheques. The auditors always find a few cancelled cheques missing, and they would this time, too.

In my cash book I should have to write the proper amount, to agree with the amount in the subsidiary cash book—the auditors always compare them. And what I'd do to balance this difference so that the bank would agree with the pass book was to enter one of the goods cheques at ten pounds more than it is. That sounds more dangerous than it really is, because there are about three thousand goods cheques alone in a year, and the auditors don't check every one, of course. What they do is to balance the bank in total, then check everything in three separate months—they call that a "moral" check—and check everything the whole of the period over twenty pounds. Over twenty pounds suits me all right—they'd find nothing that way. And the bank would

balance in total, too. My only trouble was this moral check—picking out three separate months to examine thoroughly. That seems pretty risky, when you don't know which months they are. But when you begin to think about it, and look over what they've done before, you find that in actual fact you do know what months they are, or you've a jolly good idea, anyway. To start off with they've got to check the first month to see if all the closing items last time have passed through. And they've got to check the last month to see if anything has been included that shouldn't be included and to help verify the position of the balance sheet. That leaves one month in ten, which is a lot better. And you can make a good guess at that too. The first and last months they check—June and May, are two heavy ones, so the tendency is for them to drop on one of the light ones for their third months—August, September, and January. It's about twenty to one on that third month being August, September or January. And August and September have gone; so all you have to do is avoid January.

It seems simple enough, put down like that. But the real odds are reduced by all those endless coincidences and chances that are cropping up all the time. I know perfectly well that it's risky, and that it's risky out of all proportion to the few pounds I'm going to get out of it, because I'm only going to have ten pounds every five weeks. And I know perfectly well I'm going to take the risk.

And it's a funny thing that once I've got that settled I begin to feel better right away. I put down the manure and dig over the ground and I think maybe that next summer somebody else will be here digging over this soil I've enriched. And somehow I don't mind, it's too grand just being in the garden digging and manuring to mind who's going to get the benefit of it next summer.

All the shops are decorated for Christmas and there are Christmas numbers of all the magazines in the windows and bookstalls. Smiling women opening doors on the outer cover, with fields covered with snow that you can see outside, and family groups round big log fires with lots of holly and mistletoe about and a Christmas tree on the table and everybody laughing and pulling crackers. You know that very probably the fellow who did that cover is a struggling artist who came to London to get away from his people nagging him to give up art and get a job, but the cover gets you just the same. There must be lots of families like that, where the men can buy everybody the presents they want, and everybody's happy and laughing, even the man who's bought everything, because he gets a good salary and

can afford to buy everything. He can just sit back and smoke his pipe and smile at everybody, and he isn't worried sick about somebody finding out at the office that the money he's used to buy everything with isn't his at all.

You know you're going to feel pretty sick at Christmas, very probably, if you alter that cheque and start all that wangling again, but you're going to feel sicker if you don't.

It's half-past three in the Strand and there's a sort of yellow dusk and the street is full of light and people and buses crowded with more people. You pass the Strand Palace Hotel and get a glimpse of the inside, all decorated. It must be good, to be in a place like that at Christmas time. It's good to be in the Strand, at Christmas time, with all the decorations and the excitement. There are little boys and girls with their mothers and fathers and they've been to see Father Christmas at one or other of the shops, and they've got their Christmas gifts with them, parcels clutched in their hands or under their arms, so tightly that a professional bag snatcher would have his work cut out to get them. And their eyes are nearly popping out with the excitement of going into a Lyons' or an A.B.C., and you can see that lots of the parents are very nearly as excited as the kids.

It must be nice, to have a kid. Not a baby; a youngster you could bring to town at Christmas and take him to the shops and in cafés when he's seen Father Christmas, and stuff him up with all the cakes his mother won't let him have at home, so that he's as sick as a dog before he gets home and altogether has a day he'll remember till next Christmas.

You can't beat town for that. It's exciting. It's exciting most times, but especially just before Christmas. Before I got this place I'm at now, five years ago, I was in the office of a builder in Forest Hill, and I only came into town once a month. And I used to look forward to it for days. Those magazine covers might be daft in one way, but in another way they're right. They get the right effect. The effect I got, going back from the bank that Thursday afternoon.

It's magic, somehow, and the magic was still about me when I got back in the office. I'm getting the cheques ready for Mr. Gaskell to sign, and that magic doesn't last long as I get on with that.

I'm spreading the words out on the cheques, so that when Mr. Gaskell comes to the cash cheque he won't notice that there's an unusually long space between the word eight and the word pounds. There won't be any space at all, hardly, when I've finished with it, but there's no chance of anybody noticing that the other cheques have spaces between and this is

closely written, because the other cheques go through head office account and this goes through the Strand.

At half-past four I take all the cheques in to Mr. Gaskell, and the subsidiary cash book and the wages books, and at five o'clock he rings for me and gives them back to me without a word, so that's all right.

I alter the cheque right away. I do it in the office. I'm not sneaking off home with it to alter, not me. Besides, I want to keep that sort of thing as far away from home and Helen as I can. Miss Nixon and young Potter are working in the office, of course, but they're minding their own business. Anyway, if you're about a job like altering cheques the best thing is to do it as publicly as possible. Nobody notices exactly what you're doing if you're doing it in public.

I get my pen and dip it in the ink, and then press the back on a piece of blotting paper to get some of the ink off—I'm writing at the end of a word, not the beginning. It's easy enough to add three letters to a word when that word isn't on a cheque, but it's not so easy when it is on a cheque. I don't like this job a bit, but I don't bungle it. I've finished the word "eight" with a short thin upstroke that's just right for making into an "e." I add the other "en," making the word eighteen. I don't blot it. I didn't blot it when I wrote the eight. If you blot things at different times they might look different when they're finished. But if you let them both dry they'll look the same in a few hours' time, and the fact they look different just now doesn't worry me any. I put the single stroke in front of the figure eight, and the job is finished.

I feel sort of relieved, and yet scared at the same time. This altering cheques is a bit thick. I know I'm a fool all right, but I know there's other ways of being a fool, too, and this is just my way. Unless I have bad luck I'll be safe enough until the auditors come, in June, and if I have good luck instead of bad luck I'll be safe anyway. I'll get a job at five pounds a week, perhaps, before I've done it often enough to be found out, and then that will be fine. I've written after a dozen jobs, this last six months, but I've had no luck yet. If I keep on pegging away, though, I'm sure to strike oil soon, and then I can clear out of here and very probably I'll never be found out. I'll never be found out over the cheques, anyway, because when they come back from the bank I'm going to destroy them. The auditors don't look at the cash cheques because they can verify the amounts from the subsidiary cash book. I'll get another job, sure enough, sooner or later.

X

I sowed some lettuce seed on Christmas morning. I got some of the glass I'm collecting for a greenhouse and made a long cloche with the pieces—ran a six foot cane over two crossed sticks and leaned the glass against it, like it was a tent. That would make it practically weatherproof and it would hold the heat of the sun. I'd have to let the air in, when it was sunny, and I could do that week-ends, unless the weather was bad. And if the weather was bad Helen would have to do it the first week-day the weather was good.

She doesn't know anything about gardens, but I showed her what to do, and she said she'd do it. She would do, too, if she said she would, because she'll do anything for me. She never forgets things now, like she used to do. I never get clean socks with holes in them or have to use handkies and collars twice, or have no buttons on my shirts. I not only don't have no buttons on my shirts but I have my studs and cuff-links in them. If I wanted to grumble at her now I'd have to think hard for a week and then not find anything to grumble at.

At first we'd intended to go over to her people in Camberwell on Christmas day, but some of them were going away and in the end we decided not to go. Some of my people said they'd come to us—my Uncle John and Aunt Effie and Cousin Effie and her husband and his brother, who lives with them. But that fell through too, and they didn't come. And we didn't miss them.

The mornings got lighter rapidly once Christmas was over, and by February it was light when I left home. I'd get to Edgware station at twenty-five past seven every morning—I'd not been late since the beginning of December. Helen got up with me now, too, and made my breakfast. She was quite convinced I'd changed my job and that I had to get down early in a morning. Knowing me as she did she couldn't think of a single reason why I should travel workman if it wasn't that I had to be down early. So she got up and got my breakfast ready for me. She hardly ever missed, and as we often didn't get to sleep until two and three o'clock that was pretty good. Sometimes I managed to take her in nicely. I'd push my pillow into her back when I got out of bed, and she'd keep on sleeping, then, if she didn't actually hear me get up. I'd get a piece of paper, then, and write "Ha-ha!" on

it and stick it on the alarm clock for when she wakened up. I'd make enough cocoa for her, too, in the hope she'd waken just before I was ready to go, and she'd like that: having a cup of cocoa in bed. She liked that sure enough when she knew for certain it was too late for her to help me. And then when I got home at night she'd be so full of remorse that she hadn't wakened, and she'd wait on me hand and foot, and fetch and carry for me and be so tender and loving that the night would pass in a dream, and next morning she'd be faster asleep than ever. I'd kid her about it, week-ends, and she'd laugh, and tease me back again. There was lots of laughing and teasing, those week-ends.

And there was lots of gardening, too. March came along in fine style. There was nothing but sunshine, sunshine all day long, and every day was longer than the last day. We started coming out of work into streets that were still light, and that's always exciting. And at week-ends it gave you time really to get down to work.

I put all the usual vegetables down, and some three year old asparagus roots, too. It was a real treat digging over the ground, now that it was so well manured, and so much lighter. It smelt real good now, there was none of that sour smell about it that soil has that's never been properly worked over.

I'd made a frame and I put celery and more lettuce in it, and cucumbers. I wasn't sure about the cucumbers, but I risked them. I bought some shrubs for the borders and sowed a fine collection of seeds. I wasn't so keen on the flowers, but Helen was and I wanted it to be nice for her. I put down a lawn at the back, too, and managed to get the loan of a lot of wire netting from one of the men working on the estate, to keep the birds off. I didn't need to put a lawn down at the front, because the little patch of grass had settled down nicely with being rolled with a really heavy roller the fellow next door —a big fat chap who'd come in at the end of September and wasn't going to give us a chance not to be friendly—had lent to me.

I took ten pounds at the beginning of February and ten pounds at the beginning of March and another ten pounds just before Easter, in the middle of April. It worked out at two pounds a week. That made five pounds a week, and we were managing on it nicely. I was saving a bit, because I'd cut out smoking and drinking again, and I'd travelled workman all winter, and was still travelling workman.

Before the end of May, when I was due to take another ten pounds, I'd got that much saved up, and I'll admit I was in two minds about taking any more. The auditors would be in the second week in June, if they came in as early as they had done other years—and Mr. Gaskell was as keen to see the final figures as ever he'd been, keener in fact, so I supposed they would. That was less than a month off, now, and it made me think pretty hard.

I'd had four lots of ten pounds already. I might get away with it, you never knew. But a fifth lot didn't just increase the chances of my being found out by a fifth. It increased it by a lot more than that. It probably nearly doubled it. And what was the point in doing that? I didn't need the money—I had that much saved up now. It was just pigheadedness, keeping to this amount of five pounds a week. And anyway I could leave it over until after the auditors had gone, if I liked, and make it up then, breaking into another year.

But I only thought that when I was most scared. There was a spell of wet weather when it was devilishly miserable, travelling workman and killing that three-quarters of an hour before nine o'clock; it lasted a week and I thought that about not taking the other ten pounds all that week. But afterwards, when the weather bucked up, and the week came along when I was due to take it—the third week in May it was—I knew that I'd just been thinking that way because I was scared.

That ten pounds I'd saved had had nothing to do with it. I'd saved it on fares and drinks and smokes and lunches. And if I didn't take this money at the rate of two pounds a week, making my wages up to a fiver, all the point of what I'd been doing was lost. I should have tried to get as much as I could in one daring slam, which is the best way of trying to take money, when all's said and done.

But it's awful to be so scared you go numb when people speak to you unexpectedly and you hang about the office making yourself half an hour late because two big flat-footed men are lounging against the wall by the entrance to the office and you daren't turn the corner from the Strand but walk past and cross over the road, so that you come to the office the way you can see who's hanging about. It certainly is awful.

I was going to take that other ten pounds, sure enough, but it helped me over the bad patches to pretend that I wasn't, and when it turned out that the week I was going to take it the cash couldn't be brought below ten pounds because it was one of the heavy weeks, I was so glad I could have jumped through the roof. It made my week-end. Helen was sure I'd got an advance,

I was in such a good humour. It was only a week, but a week is a long time when you're getting used to the idea that you're very soon going to spend a year or so in jail. And you can make it seem a long time, too. You can make it spin out. It's like a glass of beer when you're breaking yourself of drinking. You can linger over that drink, and get more out of it, than you'd have got out of half a dozen glasses if it didn't matter how many you had.

We had a grand week-end.

I'd been up Charing Cross Road to see one of the people we buy from, on the Monday morning, and it was about half-past twelve when I got away. I was still thinking about the week-end we'd had, and it seemed to me that Helen was going to have a rotten time if I really was found out about this money. Of course I'd known before she'd have a rotten time, but then I'd not really thought I'd be found out, and now I did think I'd be found out, and that made the difference. I'd been a fool, I thought, to carry on as I'd carried on over the week-end. We'd ought to have been careful, for a bit.

I found myself staring into a big outfitter's shop—it was no good getting back to the office before one o'clock, now, and I was taking my time.

This shop was full of men's suits, and they'd a special show of flannel suits. I've always wanted a flannel suit. Every summer I've looked into these shop windows at all the flannel suits there are, the sort that make you think of being on the decks of ships, or somewhere abroad where it's tropical, and I've stood looking at them and hating myself for being a three-pound-a-week clerk.

And I stood looking in this shop window, too. There was a flannel suit I couldn't stop looking at, grey with a thin light stripe, and it looked class. It was three guineas, and if I wanted I could go in and buy that suit, because this summer I had three guineas. I had nearly twelve guineas as a matter of fact. And I certainly did need that suit. Even the reflection of myself I could see in the glass in front of the suit, a very thin reflection, showed me how shabby I was. The suit I'd got on now I'd had two years. It was blue serge and shiny at the elbows and where I sit on it, and one of the cuffs was beginning to fray. It had looked all right until the sunshine began, but you can rely on sunshine for making an old blue serge suit look shabby. And I was standing in front of that window on the pavement and there was plenty of sunshine on me.

I needed that suit right enough. I'd only one other suit, besides this, and that was my best suit, and anyway that was a thick winter suit that wouldn't

look so good anyway, weather like this.

I needed that suit right enough, but I didn't get it. I needed that twelve guineas more. The more I thought about the week-end we'd just had the more I realized how much we needed that twelve guineas. And the other ten pounds I was going to get this week-end too. I needed that. Twenty-two pounds odd would be very handy for Helen if anything went wrong. And by the time it did go wrong I might be able to make it into twenty-five, the way I was saving, on fares and drinks and smokes and lunches. And when I thought of that I thought how much I was saving on lunches and I suddenly got mad at myself it wasn't more.

It would have been a lot more, if I hadn't been so damned silly over that business of lunching in the office. What the devil did it matter who knew I was on the cheap for meals? It had mattered once, yes, when I really couldn't afford proper lunches, but it didn't matter a curse, now that I could.

I was really wild with myself as I turned down Upper St. Martin's Lane, or whatever it's called—that street by the Leicester Square Underground. And the first thing I saw was a Lyons'. I'd buy threepennyworth of stuff from Lyons', I thought, and get twopennyworth of bananas somewhere else, and I'd have my lunch in the office. It still wasn't too late to save a few shillings that might be a godsend to Helen. The auditors wouldn't be here for another fortnight, and they usually stay three weeks. If they didn't find anything out until the end of the audit, I might have as much as three or four more pounds saved up.

I got the stuff from Lyons' and walked on to the cross roads at the bottom of Long Acre there. That's about as dangerous a crossing as you'll find in London, I think, and I must have been standing there five minutes before I got a chance to cross over, and then I went after my bananas.

Now you'd hardly believe it but I went the length and breadth of Covent Garden and couldn't buy twopennyworth of bananas. There were enough bananas in all the shops and warehouses and stalls in Covent Garden to sink ten ships, and I couldn't buy three for twopence. I couldn't buy two for twopence, or one for twopence either. The only language those men knew in connexion with bananas was cases or boxes or baskets or however it is they sell them. There were no bananas for me in Covent Garden.

I managed to get them at last off the old man who sits in our street, and I'd been so long trying to get them in Covent Garden that it was twenty past one when I got into the office. There was only the office boy in the General

Office, and I walked through into my room expecting it to be empty. But it wasn't empty.

Mr. Nolan was there, with another man, and they'd got the safe open and all the books all over the place. Mr. Nolan looked surprised when he saw me, all right.

"Lunch," he said, "thought you'd gone." And he turned back to the books. The other fellow gave a curt nod, as though he'd seen me before, but I hadn't seen him, or thought I hadn't. It wasn't until a minute or two later, when they both stopped bending over the books, that I recognized him as Mr. Burrowdale, the auditor. I remembered him from last year as a pleasant enough fellow, clean shaven, and with hair inclined to wave. But since then he'd grown a moustache and it had altered him a lot. And his eyes. I'd never noticed his eyes before. But they were those grey eyes that have a way of looking at you that isn't so jolly.

"Yes," says Nolan. "Thought you'd gone." I bet he did, too. "Just showing Mr. Burrowdale the changes we've been making. He's starting the audit tomorrow."

"Tomorrow!" I feel as though he's hit me over the head with a sandbag, but I'm not too stunned to be surprised. "Tomorrow! The books aren't closed yet! Our year doesn't end until Saturday!"

Mr. Burrowdale chips in now. I don't know whether he's been told anything about me, but he seems pretty cool. "We can get on with the checking," he says. "We can't start the final work until after the week-end, of course."

"Oh!" I said. That seemed to be all there was to say. "Oh!"

Mr. Burrowdale, the auditor, is one of the junior partners of the firm who do our audit. It's a very big firm, with branches all over the place, one of the very biggest in London. There's only Price Waterhouse and one or two firms like that who're bigger than this firm. I was a fool to think I could get away with anything with a firm like this on the job.

Mr. Burrowdale comes in the afternoon with two clerks, I remember one of them—Ferber. A sarcastic devil, he is, with a nasty habit of muttering things to the others when you passed through sometimes, so that they would laugh. And if there's one thing more than another this man Ferber likes it's to find a mistake. He found two casting mistakes in the day-book that cancelled each other out, last year, and he enjoyed it as much as though it

had been something important. The other fellow is new to me. A great, big fellow, bigger even than me. He's articled, Ferber tells Peterson during the afternoon when the big fellow has gone out, and it costs five hundred guineas to be articled to their firm. He's a Guards officer, too, Ferber says—that's something I never can make out, the way these Guards officers seem to have lives of their own that have nothing whatever to do with the army. But I can believe he's a Guards officer without any difficulty at all. He looks suited to the manner born to walk up and down in front of those soldiers parading in Wellington barracks and crime them for little bits of things other people wouldn't notice. I've watched them many a time, before nine o'clock, and it's a marvel to me the way the army gets any recruits at all. They must come from the country where they don't get much chance of seeing officers and sergeant-majors in action. I've probably watched this very fellow, if I did but know it.

So altogether it's just about the rottenest collection of auditors we've ever had. Last year there was a chap named Littleton, I think, or Littleford. He was always up to larking. He put salt in the afternoon teas, once, and then sent out to a café for more, and once he treated us all to cream buns: it was his birthday. And Mr. Burrowdale had seemed as decent, then. And the year before there'd been three different fellows entirely, and they'd not half played the game. They'd been out every morning for coffees, and every afternoon for teas; and they'd sneaked two half days off to watch matches at Lord's. With fellows like that you'd have stood a chance. But with this lot . . .!

They were all in at half-past nine next morning, and they kept up a hot pace right till lunch time. They were back at two, same as us, and stayed until we left at night. It looked fishy to me.

And they were doing the audit quite different from how they'd done it before. It didn't take me until Wednesday to decide that that ten pounds I'd been going to have this week was all off.

But that ten pounds wasn't all off. I'd become convinced, now, that they were going to find out what I'd done and I might just as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb, or whatever the saying is. That ten pounds wouldn't make much difference to what they'd do to me, and it could make all the difference in the world to Helen. So on Thursday I managed to get the week's cash under ten pounds, by putting off the payment of two biggish accounts for a week, and I got a cheque signed for nine pounds odd, and

altered it to nineteen. That wasn't so easy as altering eight to eighteen, because of the extra letter, and because of the way my hands weren't steady any more. I didn't make half such a good job of it as I'd made of the others, but they passed it at the bank all right, without a second look at it, when I went for the cash on Friday morning.

On Friday evening, when I left work, I changed the notes, for if the bank had the numbers—I didn't think they could claim them from Helen, even if they traced them, but I didn't want Helen to have any bother. So I changed the notes at various shops, and when I got into Edgware I got the other money I'd saved and I changed all the notes of that, too. And then I got Helen's post office savings account book, in which she had about thirty shillings of her own, and I paid it all into that. You couldn't be too careful, I thought.

I didn't feel so bad, then. I went down Saturday morning feeling better than I'd felt since the auditors came in on Monday. They could do their damndest, now, I thought.

But I had an awful Saturday morning, just the same.

First of all I found that the auditors were checking all the petty cash for the whole of the period, not just for three months, as they'd always done before. There was nothing in the petty cash they could find, but if they were checking it for twelve months instead of three I reckoned they were going to check everything else for twelve months instead of three, including the payments that I'd altered to conceal the money I'd had on the "cash" cheques, and including all the details in the bank sheets, instead of checking them in total.

That was why they were in so early, of course, I thought. Because it would take them a week or two longer to do all the extra checking. It would cost a lot more, too. The fee we pay for the audit is a hundred guineas, and with all the extra work they were evidently going to do it would probably cost us a hundred and fifty or even a hundred and seventy-five guineas, this time. That seemed a lot to pay, to me, to find out that I'd taken a hundred pounds. If Mr. Gaskell would give me the extra fifty or seventy-five guineas, I thought—trying to be brave about it, I suppose—I'd tell him I'd taken the hundred pounds and show him how. I'd split the extra seventy-five with him, so that he'd be better off and Helen would be better off. Pity I couldn't suggest that to him.

But the petty cash wasn't all. Mr. Burrowdale was in and out between my room and the General Office, where the auditors were working, all

morning. He was asking all manner of questions he'd never asked before, and when they were questions I didn't want to answer, and I put him off, he made reams of notes on sheets of foolscap. I didn't remember him doing that last time.

And then about eleven o'clock Mr. Gaskell sent for him and they were in the office together for a good half hour. Mr. Nolan was in with them part of the time, and once when the door opened I caught a glimpse of another man I'd never seen before. Mr. Nolan came and got my cheque book out of the safe, in a little while, and went into the office with it. It was pretty rotten for me, I don't mind admitting. I tried to sit at my desk and work, but I couldn't see when anybody came in or out of Mr. Gaskell's office, from my room, so I made excuses for going into the General Office all the time.

About half-past eleven Mr. Burrowdale came out, and the man I'd never seen before left, too. A few minutes later Mr. Nolan came out, too, carrying what looked like some sort of machine, about a foot and a half long, and narrow. It had a dust-proof cover over it, so I couldn't tell exactly what it was. He beckoned to me as he passed through the General Office, and I followed him into my own room.

"Safe," he said, putting the machine into the safe. "Cheque machine. Guv'nor's just bought it. Writes cheques." He went out then, without another word. He never said he'd show me how to work it, or to find out for myself, or anything. And as I'm the only person in the office who writes out cheques, that was jolly mysterious, to say the least. It was jolly mysterious unless I wasn't going to use it. There was nothing mysterious about him buying a cheque machine, I thought. It was only too clear why he'd bought a cheque machine. You can't alter cheques after they've been signed, when they're made out with a cheque machine. I stood by the safe, looking at the cheque machine, at the back of the second shelf. I stood with my hands on the top shelf, bending low in front of the safe. I was bending not so's I could see the machine better, but because I'd such a pain in my stomach.

I didn't expect to get into the Strand that Saturday lunch-time without a plain-clothes man on either side of me, and that's a fact.

But when the clock in the General Office pointed to one everybody started to put their things away and the covers on the typewriting machines and generally clear their desks. And so did I. I didn't know whether Mr. Gaskell had gone yet or not. Usually he went about twelve on Saturdays, but whether he had done today or not I didn't know. And I didn't like to ask. Mr.

Nolan hadn't gone, and Mr. Burrowdale hadn't gone, but Mr. Burrowdale was evidently going, because he was putting all his papers in his attaché case, and very soon he locked it and got his hat and a raincoat. I got down my own things, too, and put them on, and I waited until Mr. Burrowdale and the other auditors had gone, and there was only Mr. Nolan and the office boy left, and I went myself, then.

I've never seen a day that looked so good to me as that last Saturday in May looked when I got out into the Strand. I could have cried with relief as I walked along the crowded sunny pavements and made my way to the Underground. I'd got the whole of the week-end before me, and the way I was going to relish that week-end it was going to last as long as most weeks. It would very probably be my last week-end a free man, and I was going to enjoy it.

I managed to get an inside seat in the train, and I didn't read my paper because time you spend reading like that is time lost. Whilst you're reading a paper you're not thinking how good it is, merely being alive and well and a free man.

The train was soon out in the sunshine, at Golder's Green, and that made me feel even better. It was grand, to be flying home through the sunshine, like this, home to Helen and my garden. It was so grand I felt I could spend the whole of my life doing nothing else but sit in this train, flying along the rails like this.

But it was grand to get out at Edgware, too, and to walk through the sunshine to the Grundy Farm Estate. It was May sunshine, with that rare sparkling feel about it that sunshine doesn't have later in the summer. You can walk miles and miles in that sort of sunshine, without getting uncomfortably hot, and I was home in what seemed no time at all.

I was so glad to see Helen, to hug and kiss her in the hall, that I didn't notice there was anything wrong for quite a time. I'd finished my dinner before I saw that she looked a bit different somehow. She looked frightened. I didn't think much of it, at first, because she often looks like that on a Saturday afternoon. She isn't frightened really; it's just the way she looks. But there was something else, too. She seemed excited. As though she was trying not to be excited. I couldn't make it out.

I put my hand on her leg, and moved it slowly over her knee. Her eyes went funny, as though she'd shivered inside. She didn't stiffen, or anything, it was just her eyes.

I took her hands then, and kissed them.

"You look frightened," I said. "You're not frightened?"

She laughed then, and kissed my hands where I was holding hers. She seemed all right again, when she laughed. "Silly," she said. "Of course not!" But when she stopped laughing her eyes went funny again.

I felt suddenly mad with myself. It was this strain at the office, I supposed, it had got me down. I was imagining things. I got up from the table and pulled her up, too, and we went into the living room.

She'd put a fire in the living room, because I like a fire on Saturday afternoons, even when it's warm. We stood in front of the fire, and I began making love to her. I loved her very much, then, standing in front of the fire, in that warm room, with the sunshine in the window bay and over the bungalows, opposite. And she loved me, too. She was very tender. She was too tender, as a matter of fact, for the way I felt. I was tender with her, too, but not too tender. I kissed her eyes and her hair and her ears, and I didn't put my tongue in her mouth when I kissed her mouth. But I pressed my mouth close to hers, so that I could feel my teeth, and when I'd ruffled her curls with my fingers I stroked her neck, and then began to unloose the three buttons at the neck of her jumper. The frightened look came into her eyes again. I got both her wrists in my hand and held them over her head. She made her arms heavy, as though she didn't want to have them lifted like that, but I thought perhaps I was still imagining things, because I've done that scores of times before and she's not what you would have called wanted me not to. I pulled the jumper over her shoulders and over her head and away above her arms, and then threw it on one of the chairs, and I unfastened the hooks on her skirt and let it drop in a ring at her feet.

It was then I knew for certain there was something wrong. She tried to push back my hand, as it reached for the top of her petticoat at the back, and stiffened her body and shut her eyes, so I shouldn't see what was the matter.

"No!" she whispered. "Not like that! Not that way—now!"

I was fed up with this. I'd had a bad enough day without all this starting at home. I got hold of the top of her petticoat, and pulled, and it ripped right down the back. Helen was away from me in a flash. She'd caught the torn petticoat in front of her, and the little silk vest she had, because I must have ripped that too. She held them both in front of her, below her breasts. She didn't seem to mind her breasts, swinging over where she clung her torn clothes to her, as she backed to the door. Her eyes were wide with fright. I was too astonished to move, for a minute, and when I did she was through the door and across the hall and into the bedroom like lightning. I was well

behind her, and she'd easily have been able to shut the bedroom door on me, but one of her stockings had come down and she trod on it and fell into the bed. I caught her as she was slithering down and pulled her up by the arms, but she wriggled her arms free of me, without for a moment letting go of the clothes she pressed to her in the front, and dropped at my feet on the carpet. And then she put her arms round my knees and looked up at me with a look in her face that I hope never to see on the face of another human being for the rest of my life.

"Please!" she sobbed, her eyes sparkling with tears like two enormous wet jewels. "Please—not like that. You don't understand."

I felt so sick with myself I could have died with shame. I felt beastly. I dropped to the carpet by her side and put my head on her bare thighs. She stroked my face and ran her fingers through my hair. "I'm so sorry," she said softly, the sobs still in her voice. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. . . ."

I buried my head between her breasts. My face was hot and aching. "Tell me," I said. "Tell me what's the matter."

I wasn't a bit surprised, of course. The marvel to me was that she'd kept all right as long as she had. She couldn't blame herself for it, that was silly. But she kept on blaming herself because she thought I hated the very idea of us having a baby; and I let her keep on thinking that because I couldn't explain how it was with me.

It knocked me out all right. I felt dead. There was no more love-making that week-end, my way or any other way. All I could think was how damnable it was it should happen now. I walked round in a sort of dream. I worked in the garden on Sunday but I can't remember a thing I did, now. I went in early, earlier than I usually do, and I just hung about the house watching Helen when she thought I wasn't noticing her, and thinking how beautiful she was, as though I'd never known she was beautiful before. Every little movement she had seemed more beautiful than I'd ever known. You know how it is, when quite unexpectedly you see something that reminds you of something lovely that happened to you a long time ago. You don't know what it is you've seen, or what it is you've been reminded of, but you get a curious catch in your breath, and you feel that a little bit of something that was lovely to you a long time ago has happened to you again. A sort of essence. Well it was like that with me that week-end. Only it was worse with me because of what was going to happen to me, very soon now.

We didn't go to bed till late—nearly twelve o'clock. Usually we go about ten on a Sunday, but all that sort of thing was over now, and we didn't go to bed till late because I was frightened of going to bed. I thought it was awful, the way I'd only to lie down on that bed and if I dropped off to sleep it was morning before I knew what had happened. And morning was my idea of hell just then. I knew that really it was several hours off, but for all that helped me it was only the moment I fell asleep, so I wanted to put that moment off as long as possible.

But at twelve o'clock Helen looked tired, and I thought perhaps if I kept a grip on myself I might keep awake another hour or so, even in bed, so off we went to bed. We stood at opposite sides of the bed, getting undressed, and when Helen began to take off her underthings I took care my back was to her. If she didn't want me to undress her any more perhaps she was shy of me seeing her like that at all. I'd just slipped my old cricket shirt on—I still hadn't got a pyjama coat—and I felt the bed creak behind me, and she was leaning on it with her arms round my neck.

"You silly," she said. "I don't mean that. I don't mind you seeing me a bit. I want you to see me." She kissed my hands. "I want you to tell me you don't mind, dear," she whispered. "I know he'll stop us having a lot of fun, but we'll have a lot of fun with him, too. New fun. Different from what we've ever had before. Do say you won't mind, soon."

"I don't mind, sweetheart," I said. She lay on top of the bed. She'd got her nightdress on, all ready for getting in bed properly, but she lay on top of the bed.

"Honest?"

"Honest."

She got hold of my hands. "Tell him," she said, very softly, "tell him you don't mind. Tell him you're glad. Tell him you're looking forward to seeing him, and that he's got to be a great big chap like you, and we're going to scold him if he isn't. Tell him. Talk to him."

I felt awful. I got hold of the bottom of her nightie, and my hands trembled so that I could hardly move them. I pulled up her nightie as though it was something sacred I was doing. I felt awful. I pulled it up to her breasts, and turned back her vest, and then I kissed her, very lightly, just below her left breast, where I imagined the baby would be beginning. And I told him just what she'd said. I told him I didn't mind, and that I was glad, and that I was looking forward to seeing him, and that he'd got to be a great big chap like me. I felt my heart was bursting, but I told him all right. My

tears were dropping all over her white body as I told him, but I told him. And then I added one of my own. I said that if he was a little girl instead and she was half as lovely as her mother, she'd be the loveliest girl in the world with one exception.

XI

For a day or two I thought of risking everything on taking a large sum of money. All I'd got for Helen was twenty-seven pounds, and twenty-seven pounds can't be a great deal of help to a woman who's going to have a baby and hasn't got a man who can give her any help. If I risked everything on say a hundred pounds, that would be a different matter entirely. I was desperate. The auditors were sure to find out, I thought, so I may as well do the best I could for Helen, now, and hang the consequences.

But then one or two things happened that made me change my mind, and I began to wonder whether the auditors would find out or not. That man Littleford, who'd been on the audit the previous year, came in on Monday, as cheerful and full of pranks as ever. I was surprised to see four of them there, and said so, and Mr. Burrowdale, who seemed a lot more cheerful, too, told me they wanted the audit finished quickly. They'd got a big law case coming off, in a fortnight, that involved one of the companies they audit, and he wanted to be free of this for then.

That made me feel a lot better, you can guess. If he was going to have it finished in a fortnight it not only explained why they were in so early but it also showed that they couldn't be going to do all the extra work I'd thought. He opened out in a quite friendly way, afterwards, and I gathered that last week he'd been in a bit of a tear because this court case might need his attention before the end of the audit, in which case one of the senior partners would be taking over, and that was why he'd been in a bad temper and why he'd taken all those notes. At least, I hoped so.

And then Mr. Nolan came in on Monday afternoon, and showed me how to work the cheque machine, and how he'd bought it partly on the recommendation of Mr. Burrowdale, and everything was explained away so innocently that I began to feel all right again.

There was no question of me taking any more money now. I'd no doubt that if I was prepared to take heavy risks I'd soon find some way of wangling it, cheque machine or no cheque machine, but it was this baby made the difference. I wasn't going to take any more money now, whatever happened. Not if we had to give up the bungalow. The baby had altered everything. It had altered Helen. Maybe it had altered her so that we could manage to be happy whatever happened. I didn't see how that was possible

because there are certain conditions in which you can't keep your respect when there are only two of you, and with a baby it must be worse, not better. But I wasn't going to worry about that now. If I could get over this audit I was safe for good, because all the wangling had happened during the period of the audit. Once I got out of this perhaps I could get another job. Surely I'd get another job soon? I'd been trying a full year, now. I began to write after advertisements that I didn't really know were suitable, so anxious was I to get another job.

As the days went on I began to get more and more confidence. First I found the auditors had finished the rebates, and then the cash purchases, and then the agents' sales. That was the end of their second week, and I was free for another week-end.

We had a lovely week-end.

I hadn't touched Helen for a week now, and I didn't want to, somehow, either. I loved her in a different kind of way, like I'd wanted to when I bought her that fur coat. She didn't understand that, at all, and thought I was still put out about her being fixed with a baby, and she made up for it to me all she could. She was like a dog that you've not treated right, and she couldn't do too much for me.

And I couldn't do too much for her, either. I didn't go in the garden at all, and that was about the first week-end we'd been there that I hadn't gone in the garden. We were like some soft courting couple, the way we hung together and kissed hands, and talked silly baby talk. It was grand.

One minute the auditors were there, and the next they were gone. It was funny. Mr. Burrowdale and the three other fellows were clearing their papers on Friday night, and getting their things together, and Peterson, the correspondence clerk, said he expected they must be about finished, now, and Mr. Burrowdale said very nearly, very nearly.

And the next morning, Saturday, there were only two of them down, the man who was a Guards officer and Littleford, and they sat all morning doing additions in the day-book. I didn't think much of that because they're never all down on a Saturday morning. But on Monday nobody came at all. And on Tuesday nobody came at all. And when it got about eleven o'clock I said, that was funny, what had happened to the auditors, I wondered? And Peterson said oh, they'd finished. Didn't I know? And then he remembered that I'd been out yesterday when Mr. Burrowdale came in for a few minutes to collect the last of his papers, and say he'd finished now, and that they

were preparing the accounts in the office and they'd be sent in as soon as they were completed.

I can't describe what that did to me. It was a bit like the day I got the letter saying I'd got this job, at fifty shillings a week, when up till then I'd only been earning thirty-five. It was a bit like the day I scored four goals in the South London Charity Shield match with Herne Hill Amateurs, and everybody said that a fat man with a cigar who'd come in the dressing-room afterwards and shaken hands with me was a scout for Chelsea. It was a bit like the morning after Helen and I got married, wakening up and finding her there in bed beside me, seeing how lovely she was and knowing that we were really married. It was a bit like all those times, and it was a lot different, too. I felt taller and straighter and lighter, and different altogether. I knew that the accounts were not signed yet—not even prepared—and until they were there was always danger, but I knew that that was all bosh. I knew I was safe as houses, that they'd finished completely with all the books and that they hadn't found out what I'd done.

They hadn't found out what I'd done. Mr. Gaskell, he'd not found out what I'd done. Nolan had not found out what I'd done. The auditors had not found out what I'd done. I was a pretty smart fellow, I thought. I'd done well. It was a feather in my cap, sure enough, to get away with that. Two pounds a week for a year I'd had. A hundred pounds. A hundred and four pounds, to be exact. And they'd not found out. Nobody had found out.

I found myself sitting at my desk in the little accounts office, and for sheer joy I suddenly started thumping the top of the desk with both my fists. I thumped and thumped and thumped. Potter was out, but Miss Nixon turned and looked at me as though I'd gone mad.

"I'm starting to eat people up next," I said. "You'd better look out."

At lunch time I went into the Corner House again. I'd not been in the Corner House for seven weeks, but now I went in the Corner House again.

I was pleased with myself. I'd got away with it fine, and that was good. I wasn't going to do that any more, ever, whatever happened, and that was good, too. I had a really good lunch—it cost me two shillings, and spelt roll and butter for the rest of the week, but it was worth it. And when I left I put sixpence under my plate. And that made me feel better than any three glasses of beer I've ever had. That was my sixpence, I thought. That was my very own sixpence, not Gaskell's, and I tell you it made me feel real good, putting it under the plate for the waitress.

Helen really believed me when I told her I wanted the baby. She really believed me, now. She could see how different I was. You look years younger, she said to me, what's happened?

I'd like to have told her what had happened. I couldn't do that, of course, because Helen has old-fashioned ideas about all that sort of thing, but I'd like to have told her.

And she was right about me feeling younger. I did feel younger. I didn't realize I'd been feeling any other way, until the auditors had finished, but now I could tell I felt younger. I was different. I was different still, from how I'd ever been before. I was different with Mr. Gaskell. I didn't have that funny turning over sensation in my stomach I'd always had with him before. I didn't have to keep on telling myself I was better than him, all the time I was in his office. I knew I was better than him, now. I didn't have to keep telling myself that, I just took it for granted. I was honest, now. I was even more honest than he was. And I had my respect with it, now, too. Before if I'd been honest with him I'd have thought it was because I was frightened to be anything else. Now I knew it wasn't that, I was honest now because I like being honest. I'd been both ways, now, and I knew which I liked best. You can't know which you like best when you're only one way, can you?

People who're honest only because they've always been that way, and don't know any other way, don't know what being honest is. I do. To be able to turn round into the office by the nearest corner, and not mind who's lounging about the doorway, and not get that feeling in your stomach, like suddenly dropping down in a lift, when you're told the boss wants you, and not wake up in the morning with that dead feeling that you are sure must be worse than things can possibly be, until you remember how things actually are, and not sit in the train stricken with a sort of numbed horror that you can't get the better of no matter how sensible you are with yourself: that's what it's worth to be honest, and people who've never been anything else but honest don't know the first thing about it. Honesty isn't a virtue. It's a luxury.

I'd like to have told Helen, but I couldn't do that.

Altogether I'd put twenty-seven pounds into that post office savings account of Helen's, and I wasn't going to touch it whatever happened. That was for Helen and the baby, just in case for if something went wrong after all. I knew it wouldn't, now, but it was just in case.

So with not touching that money, and with not taking any more from the firm, only my wages, I was soon hard up again.

Three pounds a week was no use to us at all. We could live grand on five pounds, and save on it, but three pounds was useless. I was soon behind with the house and the furniture again, but as I'd been paying them regularly for six months, now, they didn't bother very much. I wrote and told them I'd pay both the next month's instalments together, and they said that would be all right.

It would be all right, if I could do it, but the trouble was I didn't know how I was going to do it. Surely, I thought, I'd get a job? I read all the advertisements in the *Telegraph* as though my life depended on it. I wrote after everything. I said I was an experienced manager of a glass bottling factory, and an advertising agent, and a first rate charity organizer, and a company secretary, and a personnel manager, and an expert sales organizer, and goodness knows what else. I reckoned if only I could get interviews I'd persuade somebody into giving me a job worth having. I'd no doubt I'd be able to do it all right. If you've confidence you can do any job all right. Employers made a great to-do about this that or the other sort of experience, but when you come down to brass tacks anybody with their wits about them can do the job all right. It's having your wits about you that counts.

It was a grand hot day in July I got an interview with one of the firms I'd written to. The letter was waiting for me when I got home in the evening, making an appointment for the next day, and I'd no idea what sort of a job it was, because the letter didn't say; but it gave the date of my letter, so I looked up the advertisement page of the *Telegraph* for that day—I'd torn the advertisement pages out, and made notes in the margins of all the lies I'd told, so I'd know where I was if I got an interview: all the different ages I said I was, and the different sorts of experience I'd had. I looked it up and I found that this one was for an expert sales organizer, so I lay awake half the night making up lies about sales organizing.

As I say, it was a grand hot day in July when I went for the interview. I'd put my best suit on, the thick winter suit, which was all I'd got that I was fit to be seen in. It was so hot that I took off the waistcoat, when I got to work. I thought it seemed daft, a thick suit like that, with no waistcoat, but I felt awful with my waistcoat on, and I couldn't sit having an interview with anybody looking like a boiled lobster. So I took my waistcoat off, and folded it up and put it in one of the drawers in my desk.

The firm was the City Appliance Company, and there were two offices in a street off High Holborn. The appointment was for eleven o'clock, and I got there about five minutes to eleven. There was a young woman who wasn't as young as she made out, with hair that had once been another colour

altogether, and she sat at a typewriter with a box of nail polish or something on the carriage, and poked at her fingers with a stick. She took the letter, making this appointment, and went into another room with it, and soon I was in this other room with the director.

This director was only a young chap, not much older than me. He was a pretty smart chap though, I could soon see that. He asked me where I'd worked and I told him about the place in Forest Hill, and the place I was at now, and I said I'd been three years with a firm named Schofields, Ltd., in Australia Avenue, and that was where I'd had experience in sales organizing. I knew I was safe in telling any lies I liked about Schofields, because Schofields had been a firm we had dealings with and went into liquidation years before when the principal director had died suddenly. Everybody else belonging to the firm must have gone, now, because a few months before we'd had to try and find out a reference number of some goods and we'd written to them in the hope of getting in touch with somebody who knew, but the letter had been returned by the postal authorities, so I knew I was safe in saying anything I liked about having worked at Schofields. If they wrote for a reference the letter would only be returned.

So I told this fellow all the experience I'd had at Schofields for three years—I'd said I was twenty-eight, not twenty-five—and all about how old Schofield had died suddenly, and what a pity it was, because it had been such a good job. I pitched a good yarn, but I wasn't sure whether I altogether got away with it, because this fellow was smart, it was easy to see that. He was young but he was smart.

We talked for about half an hour, and then he wanted to know what salary I'd been thinking of and I said five pounds, as though I knew five pounds wasn't much, but what could you do these days?

So he looks at my suit, and my not having a waistcoat, and my tie, that wasn't a new tie but an old tie that had been washed; and that fellow was so smart that as he looked at me I bet he could tell I hadn't any pyjamas, and wore an old cricket shirt instead.

And then he leaned his elbows on his desk, that was all littered up with papers, and he said:

"Five pounds is a good wage these days. There's not so many young chaps start in a new job at five pounds. Tell you what I'll do. You start at four. Four isn't so bad these days, you know. You start at four. And if you're all right I'll give you—say in a year's time—two-fifty a year. How's that?"

I was that excited I could have smashed his desk. But I made out I was thinking hard about it, and I frowned a bit, and hesitated, and then said very slowly that I thought that would be all right. And he said good, that was all right with him, too, and today was Thursday and could I start Monday week. So I said yes, I thought I could manage that—as though really it would take me a month to square up all the important work I'd got outstanding—and we shook hands on it. It was a funny thing, but it wasn't till we shook hands on it that I suddenly felt uneasy. It was only then I realized that all I'd seen of this City Appliance Company was these two rooms, and just this man and this woman, and there seemed to be no stock or anything of any value, except a couple of desks and some chairs and a lot of dusty files and boxes. And this fellow hadn't told me at all clearly what it was I was going to do. He'd looked very closely at the reference I'd got from the Forest Hill firm, though, and he'd said he'd expect me to bring a reference from where I was now. That reassured me a bit. I thought it was a bit daft, to suppose there could be anything bogus about it. What could there be bogus about it? Who would get a man out of a job, a job he'd had five years, and for what reason?

I thought all this walking down Holborn, and it seemed crazy to me. There was nothing bogus about it. The man was all right. The job was all right. And four pounds was all right, too. I was sorry it wasn't going to be five pounds a week—two hundred and fifty is only four pounds fifteen, not five pounds, but that was a lot better than three pounds, wasn't it?

I walked across Covent Garden, and down into Southampton Street. I stopped at a gentlemen's outfitter, and thought how soon I'd be able to buy a good suit. And I stood and stared into the window for quite a long time, and I couldn't for the life of me think why I wasn't more excited.

Mr. Nolan was away—Miss Fitzroy had heard that he was ill, but nobody seemed to know anything definite—so I had to give my notice in to Mr. Gaskell himself.

I sat writing out the cheques thinking of all the different things I could say. I couldn't say too much, of course, because I had to get a reference, but I could be pretty off-hand with him. I bet I thought of a dozen different ways I could make him feel small, and it was annoying that I wouldn't be able to use more than one of them. And I didn't know which one until I told him, it all depended on what he said, of course.

I didn't get a chance to go in to him until four o'clock, when I'd got all the cheques ready for him to sign. I knocked on his door, waited until I guessed he'd had time to answer, and then walked in. I went to his desk and

cleared one corner and put the cheques down. He was busy writing and didn't even look up, so I coughed and hovered round a minute, and when he still didn't look up I coughed again.

He looked up, at that, and frowned.

"I—I want to give notice," I said.

"Notice?" He looked quite blank.

"To leave. I want to leave. I'm taking another job."

"Oh!" he said. "Really!" he smiled. "You're making a change, eh? Well, I hope it'll turn out all right. Where you going?" He was quite decent. I was surprised. I hadn't expected him to be decent. Perhaps he was having me on.

"The City Appliance Company, Holborn."

Mr. Gaskell frowned. "I've not heard of it," he said. "New place probably. That's what a young chap like you wants to do, get into a new place. Nothing for you in the old-established places. Get into a business that's young and you don't know where it will take you."

I was surprised all right. I'd never heard Mr. Gaskell talk like this before. His very voice was different, and his manner of speaking. He was acting like a human being. I suppose even the worst bosses are human beings, when they're not at business. I suppose the top and bottom of it is they daren't be human beings at business, if they don't want to risk being failures. I should think that's about the size of it. I was too surprised to say anything. I just stood and stared at him. He looked all right, when he cocked his head up at you and smiled, like that. I couldn't get over it.

He knocked the ash off his cigar and pushed the cigarettes over to me. "When're you going?"

"Monday week," I said, and found myself adding: "If that's convenient."

He waved his cigar. "We can't stand in your way. Nuisance Nolan being away, but you can't help that. What're they paying you?"

"Two-fifty," I said. They weren't paying me that for a year, yet. I was only to get four pounds for a year, but I would get two-fifty, and two-fifty was practically the fiver he'd refused to give me a year before. I hoped he remembered that. "Two-fifty," I said.

"I'm very glad," he said. "Sorry to lose you, but glad you're doing better for yourself. Don't be frightened to ask for a reference, if you want one." He waved his cigar again, to show me that the interview was over, and turned

back to his papers. I walked out of his office in half a dream. Who'd have thought the old man could be like that?

Nolan didn't turn in the next week, and I was sorry. I'd have liked him to be there, the week I was leaving. I've done a bit of toadying to him, in my time, and I wouldn't have minded making up for it. But he didn't turn in. It seemed to be pretty definite that he was ill, and there seemed to be no chance of him coming back before I left.

Now I was definitely starting in a new job at more money I was able to break into that money I'd put away in Helen's name. I'd have to look smart, now, and I'd be able to make it up out of the extra money I'd get.

I bought a nice summer suit for five guineas. It wasn't a flannel suit, because of wearing it sometimes in the winter, but it was a light tweed and I liked it a lot. I bought two pairs of shoes at that high-class shop at Charles Street that sells only very expensive shoes and has a sale about twice a year, when you can buy shoes that are priced two and three guineas for fifteen shillings, if you happen to chance on a pair that fits you—they're all misfits, or something. I chanced on two pairs that fit me, and I got them both for thirty shillings. I bought a proper raincoat. I paid thirty-five shillings for it, and you could see it was good. I do like having good class things. I paid fifteen shillings for a hat. I hated spending the money, but it was worth it. And I bought a pair of pyjamas. That was my only luxury, a pair of pyjamas. I know it's daft, to buy one pair of pyjamas, because you've got to buy another pair, very soon, but I bought these pyjamas from the shop at the corner of the Strand. They were silk, light blue, with that Russian sort of collar you sometimes see, and I'd watched them come down from ten and sixpence to seven and sixpence, and then, coming from the office on Thursday night, I saw them marked down to six and nine. If I'd have had the money I'd have got them then, but I hadn't. I'd got money at home, but I hadn't enough on me, so I thought, all right, I'll bring enough money with me tomorrow, and get them first thing before I go to the office, get them at nine o'clock, as soon as the shop opens.

So before I came out on Friday morning I made sure I'd enough money. I had just seven and sixpence, in silver. There was a pound note in the dressing-table drawer where we always keep whatever spare money we have, so's to be handy, but I didn't take that. Seven and sixpence was just enough: ninepence fare and six and ninepence for the pyjamas. I didn't need

more than that because it was Friday, and I'd have my wages before lunch time. So I kissed Helen and took the paper and started off for town.

It was grand, walking into Edgware. The sun was slanting over the trees, and the birds in the hedges were kicking up a great fuss, and it seemed that all the world had got a new job and was looking forward to starting it on Monday. I must have taken my time, walking into Edgware, because when I got to the station the time was twenty minutes to eight.

I was so surprised I just stood gaping at the clock. I'd not been late for that half-past seven workman ticket since the beginning of December—over six months—and I thought at first the clock was wrong, but I could tell the clock was right because there was hardly anybody at the booking office. And as soon as I realized that I didn't stay around making myself conspicuous any longer, I was out in the street and on a tram going to Burnt Oak in no time.

At Burnt Oak I booked a twopenny return, like I'd done that other morning last September, and then got in the train. I didn't like having to do this again, dodge off at Leicester Square and pay twopence from Warren Street, but I couldn't let myself in for the full fare. Besides, I should have to pay the fare one way right off, and then I couldn't buy those pyjamas until I got paid, at lunch time, and they'd probably be gone, then.

But I didn't like it, I admit. I didn't like it. It worried me all the way into town. It was cheating just as I'd been cheating all along; and I was supposed to have stopped cheating. I was honest now. I was honest because I liked being honest, and now I was being dishonest. But this was just one last time, I told myself. It was the last time, because it was the last week I was travelling early. Always in future, I told myself, I'd be travelling on a season again, and I'd never ever be tempted to do this. I'd do it just this last time.

But when I got to Leicester Square I stayed on the train. I went on to Strand. I'd finished with all that sort of work, and pyjamas or no pyjamas I wasn't going to start again. I'd pay the proper fare and be damned to it, and if my pyjamas had gone they'd have to be gone.

There was a crowd at the lifts, and I could have got through easily, without it being noticed I hadn't handed in a ticket, but I pushed to one side and stood by the inspector. He looked up and I could see he recognised me as one of the regulars.

"I've lost my ticket," I said, and pulled the money out of my pocket. I hadn't lost my ticket, of course, but I couldn't tell him I'd started to cheat and then changed my mind.

"All right," he said, and nodded to the lift. He was going to let me through.

I felt a fool. He'd stopped the people behind me, now, and everybody in the lift was looking at me. I don't know whether it was waiting for me or not, but I felt as though all London was waiting for me, and staring at me.

"It was only to Colindale," I said, feeling myself go crimson. I muttered some idiotic explanation and paid him the excess fare. Everybody stared at me all the time the lift was going up, and I could have killed the ticket inspector and myself too. But I was glad I'd done it all the same. When I got out of the station I walked along the Strand, and I remembered all the other times I've walked along the Strand with my stomach in my boots, and I was glad I'd done it. It was worth losing those pyjamas for all right, much as I'd wanted them.

But I didn't lose them. I looked in the window, as I left the office at lunch time with my wages in my pockets, and the whole window at that side was empty. But everything was back again, when I passed at two o'clock, and there were the pyjamas, still marked at six and ninepence. I was in that shop almost before I knew where I was. There were a lot of people inside, and I had to wait a long time before I was served, but I didn't mind that. Nobody was going to grumble at me for being late now, not this week, my last with the firm.

It was twenty-five minutes to three when I got into the office. I nearly bumped into Mr. Burrowdale, the auditor, at the door; he was going out as I came in. He nodded and passed through, and I smiled to think it was the first time I'd seen him this year that I hadn't been scared. He'd been to see Mr. Gaskell with the final accounts, I supposed. They would be about completed, now. I wondered how much profit they showed. Several thousand, I bet, even after Mr. Gaskell had hidden some of it away.

I hadn't got to the door of my room before the office boy was after me.

"You're wanted. Mr. Gaskell. In a great tear," he said. "Been after you ever since two o'clock. There he is again," he said, as the telephone extension buzzed and he dived across the office to it.

I went into my own room and put the parcel I was carrying, my pyjamas, in a drawer. I wasn't going to get excited about Mr. Gaskell being in a tear after me, now. I was leaving on Saturday, so why should I bother about him?

I opened my desk and the safe, and in a minute the office boy was at my door again.

"He wants you," he said, jumping about like a cat on hot bricks. "He wants you. I've told him you're coming."

"I am coming," I said. "I am coming. Don't fuss."

"I'm not fussing. It's the Guv'nor."

"Well, tell him not to fuss, then."

I got the cash book out of the safe, and put the duplicate deposit receipt book open on the desk all ready for carrying on with the checking I'd been doing before lunch. Then when I'd done that, and everything was all ready for carrying on with, I went across the General Office to Mr. Gaskell, and I took my time about it.

I knocked on the door of his office, and then opened it and walked in. He looked up as I shut the door behind me, and sat straighter in his chair.

"Ah!" he said. "Ah! I want you." He put down what it was he'd been looking at, and I could see, when I got to the desk, it was the typed accounts. It was the balance sheet I could see: the auditors' certificate was at the foot of it, but it wasn't signed—that would be because Mr. Gaskell hadn't signed it as managing director. The auditors won't sign it until he has signed it.

"I want you," said Mr. Gaskell, and he looked at me in a way that made me wonder what was the matter. He was different than he'd been that day last week when I'd given my notice in, and he was different than he usually is with me, too. He was a business man again, not a human being, yet he was looking and talking not just as though I was a mere underling but as though I was an object of interest.

"That job," he said. "The City Appliance Company. You're supposed to be going Monday?"

Supposed to be going Monday? What the devil did he mean, supposed to be going?

"I am going Monday," I said.

He ignored that. "What I mean," he said, "is this. You're not definitely engaged for Monday? You're only engaged subject to satisfactory references?"

I stared at him. I didn't know what he was talking about.

"I mean: if this man doesn't like the reference you get from here he can refuse to engage you, he's no need to give you a week's notice, you're not really engaged by him at all, yet. Is that right?"

My tongue was drying in my throat. I nodded my head. Mr. Gaskell banged his fat hands together with satisfaction, and I tried to swallow. I noticed the ebony ruler was still there. It was a heavy ruler, right enough, and one really good swipe would brain him.

"Good," he said. "Good. That's what I wanted to know. Now look here. Listen to me. I've been watching you, lately. You've come on. You're twice the man you were. When you wanted an advance, a year or so back, I didn't give it you because you weren't worth it. No good beating about the bush. But you've come on since then. You're worth it now. Now listen to me. You want to get on. Naturally. You get a job with a new place, at two-fifty a year. Good. You're taking chances, going to a new firm, but it's worth it. It's worth it when there are no chances with the old-established firms. But I find now I can offer you a much better chance here. Mr. Nolan. You don't know about Mr. Nolan?"

My tongue is still swelling in my mouth and I just shake my head. I don't know about Mr. Nolan.

"He's off. Ill. You know that. But d'you know what he's got?" He lowers his voice, as though he's talking about somebody suddenly dead. "Consumption. So he won't be coming back. You didn't know that, did you?"

"No," I said. I can speak now. "No."

"I'm giving him six months' salary. Six months'." Mr. Gaskell says this very loudly. He's pleased about it, it's easy to see that. "Six months' salary. But I want somebody to take his place. To train to take his place," he adds, hastily.

"Now with a bit more experience, and with me keeping an eye on you, I think you'd do. Deputy Manager. Not manager, yet. Deputy Manager. I could give you five pounds a week. Two-fifty is only four-fifteen, remember; I could give you five. In a year or so, perhaps, I could give you more. It would depend how you shaped. Five pounds a week. What d'you say?"

What did I say?

"Yes," I said. "Yes, sir."

"Yes," I said to Helen. "Yes. Deputy Manager. Five pounds a week. To take Nolan's place soon. Nolan. He got eight pounds. Eight pounds! I'll

have that, soon. I'll be manager, then. I'm Deputy Manager, now. Five pounds a week."

She kissed my hands. "You don't know how glad I am. Eight pounds a week. Eight pounds! We won't know what to do with it. But . . . Five pounds. You must have been having that for a year and more, now."

I smiled. "But not from Mr. Gaskell," I said. "He didn't give it me."

She thought about that for a bit, as we stood in front of the dressing-table, arms round each other. "I see, I think," she said. "You won't be travelling workman, any more, or anything of that sort, and you won't be getting any more of those." She smoothed her hand over the wrinkles, and I kissed her wrist. "I don't know what you've been up to this last year," she said, with sudden wisdom, "but I think you've had a rotten time." She still smoothed her hand over my forehead, and then ran her fingers into my hair. I thought at first she was looking for more grey hairs—she'd taken several out lately—but she just ruffled my hair.

"I've not had a rotten time," I said, all at once. "I've had a good time. It's the best year I've ever had." And I started kissing her again.

And it was the best year I'd ever had, too. I'd been a fool, maybe, but me, I don't call what I'd done foolish. I'd do it again.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *I'd Do It Again* by Frank Tilsley]