

CHAPTER XXV

Gerald's father's operation was so far successful, that it brought him immediate relief. The recovery, however, was slow, and he spent in all about eight weeks in the Nursing Home. Gerald saw him regularly. The latter's sensitiveness to environment, together with all the circumstances attending these visits, contributed to conjure up in him a sombre mood which became almost chronic; he lived in it, not merely on the days when he went to the Home, but all the week round. It was characteristic, however, of his temperament that he could feel sombre without feeling crushed. To be constantly confronted with reminders of suffering and death, was terribly oppressive to one who feared pain so acutely, both for himself and others, yet it also suited, in a certain way, a fundamental melancholy which characterised alike his actual nature and his conception of existence. With Gerald, it was always just when he was personally unhappy that he felt most tender-hearted. High spirits always seemed to bring a certain callousness with them. Perhaps this was why he had found so much in those chapters out of Sartor Resartus which he had recommended to Janet, and it is certain that he liked reading about people who, as the result of long and intense suffering, give up all personal hope, all expectation of happiness and 'die into' a new life, in which their personal interests count for nothing. One of his favourite quotations was from Shaw's Heartbreak House: "When your heart is broken, then your boats are burned. It is the end of happiness and the beginning of peace." Just now he liked to think of himself as passing to and fro between the three lesser sufferers, his father, Janet, and Humphrey (for he regarded Humphrey's violent intellectual activity as the restless tossing and turnings of hidden pain), shedding upon them a little of the wisdom and calm which had come to him from his own emotional 'death' in the past. This little touch of vanity, however, was not incompatible with an essential sincerity and modesty; for one thing, he was aware of it himself.

Out of the same feeling, that he had blessings to bestow, he made an especial point of getting Humphrey to go with him to Dale End on one of the days on which he called on Janet. Moreover, he had a strong feeling (based on what, he hardly knew) that she could understand her brother much better now than she had done before. And in this he proved to be right, though things did not fall out quite as he had expected. It was about five weeks after his first visit to the boarding-house; and they found Janet sitting in the garden, whither tea was subsequently brought them. The first thing Gerald noticed was that she had done her hair a different way, and it struck him later that the new way suited her better.

He had expected that the conversation would quickly become significant and begin to bristle with all sorts of ethical implications. He had indeed been preparing small magazines of tact with which he intended to fairly blow brother and sister on to common ground. But time passed and nothing of the sort occurred. They had tea, during which they spoke a good deal of John and Margaret, and afterwards Janet showed them the delicate piece of embroidery at which she was working, and which was troubling her somewhat by blowing about her lap in the stiff little summer breeze. She explained that it was to form part of the trousseau of the young insurance clerk, whose means were decidedly limited. "It's pretty, isn't it?" she

asked, holding it up, and she spoke as if she valued their opinion on such matters as much as anybody else's.

Later the conversation turned to Humphrey's plans and here Gerald thought he saw his chance. He alluded jestingly to Humphrey's omnivorous and eccentric reading — supposing this would lead on to the kind of talk he had imagined. But, although Janet laid down her sewing, while they were on this subject, nothing like an argument took place. She seemed disinclined to rise to any of the indirect allusions which Gerald made to previous conversations between herself and him (especially the one which had occurred on his first visit). Humphrey, however, could not help being struck by the positive enthusiasm with which she remarked, apropos of his own efforts: "It's fine to try and discover everything for yourself!" He wondered to what extent this implied a revision of her whole attitude towards him; and he was soon enlightened. In the hall, just as they were leaving, Janet seized a clothes-brush and began to reprove her tall brother for the state of his clothes. "Why they're terrible!" she said. "My dear boy, you really can't go out like that! I suppose all your other suits are just as bad!" She turned him round and, with proper feminine relentlessness, began work on his back. "Will you send all your clothes to me!" she went on, "and I'll look them through and have them properly pressed and cleaned, if they need it! — Look at this! It's awful! You really ought to have someone to brush you." Whereupon she caught hold of a pair of meek shoulders and twiddled him round again like a revolving bookcase. Then followed the incident by which Gerald remembered this afternoon for such a long time afterwards.

Janet brushed the front of Humphrey's coat, stepped back, and then forward again, and, by way of a finishing touch, picked something off the collar. Gerald happened to be watching her face, and he saw her suddenly catch her breath and begin to flush up. She was holding between her fingers a single long hair, of a different colour from Humphrey's own. For a moment she seemed to be fighting something. At last she drew one long deep breath; then she shook the hair from her fingers, and, giving Humphrey a clear look, laughed at him in that relaxed, spontaneous way which cannot by any means be assumed and immediately makes the laugher the master of any situation. She laughed at him, in fact, as if he were a schoolboy. "You certainly ought to have someone to brush you!" she said. And Gerald could not remember ever having seen Humphrey look quite as sheepish as, for a moment, he did then. Janet turned to Gerald:

"Goodbye!" she shot out, "keep him brushed!" She said nothing more to Humphrey, but went up and kissed him very gently on the forehead.

CHAPTER XXVI

During the next few days Gerald finished his article on Carlyle, which, with the reading he had had to do, had taken him altogether about two months. He had become deeply absorbed in it and, in addition to the biographical part wrote much on Carlyle's outlook or Weltanschauung. Compelled to re-read such works as Sartor Resartus and the French Revolution, he was simply astonished at their greatness, and tried accordingly to convey this impression to his readers. He quoted the sardonic eulogy of 'victorious analysis' in the opening chapters of the Revolution,

and other similar passages, and pointed out how, for anyone who could read with a modicum of attention, such passages already contained the substance of all the most modern tendencies of thought — the emphasis on vitalism, the reaction against logic, and so forth. Here he had Humphrey and his circle in mind, but refrained from adopting a superior attitude. On the contrary he remarked how unfortunate it was that, since Carlyle, the only people who did realise that these vague gropings had already found a clear and powerful expression in German literature were just — the people who could not really understand it — tired over-cultured souls who used their bit of knowledge merely to prick the bubble of a youthful enthusiasm, which exasperated them because they could not share it.

He compared the passage on 'Victorious Analysis' with Faust's irony:

Wer will was Lebendigs erkennen und beschreiben *
Sucht erst den Geist herauszutreiben
Dann hat er die Teile in seiner hand —
Fehlt leider nur das geistige Band

* Who longs of living things to know and tell,
Is careful first the spirit to expel:
Now every part lies waiting to be [covered?] —
Except (alas) one part — the spirit-bond!

and went on to show how this 'spirit-bond' which was missing from Nature now that Science had so carefully taken her to pieces, became visible once more in a remarkable way in such passages as the magnificent one on the 'Time-garment' in Sartor Resartus. 'This conception,' he wrote, 'is really an attempt to grasp the living, the coming-into-being, whereas the ordinary mathematical conception of time can only grasp the dead.' And he finished by suggesting that these deeper vistas in Carlyle's outlook had never yet been understood, and that the future would have more to say on the subject.

When the article was done, he posted it direct to Lord Bilbury, as he had been asked, and almost immediately received back an enthusiastic acknowledgment written in his Lordship's own hand.

'Dear Marston,' he wrote, with a familiarity which Gerald could not help something savouring, 'I must thank you for the extremely suggestive and thought-provoking article which you have written for us on Carlyle. It is just the kind of thing we want, and will, I think, help to build a bridge from the ordinary inexpert mind to philosophy. I may add that to me, personally, it opens up entirely new vistas of approach to the Sage of Ecclefechan, and has determined me to read many of his most significant works over again. I have forwarded the article to the editors, and you will no doubt receive the proof in due course.

With sincere thanks,
Yours etc.
Bilbury.'

"My telegraphic address," said Gerald to Humphrey, as he handed him the letter, is "Vistas!" Inwardly he gave a sigh of relief. He felt he could now rest on his oars for a little. Accordingly he wrote off and accepted a standing invitation from John and Margaret to spend a few days with them, after which he decided to follow his father North and spend a month or two at home with his people.

It was a pleasant visit. Gerald felt justifiably lazy and perfectly content to trail vaguely round with the Trinders, doing what they did or watching them do it, as the case might be.

Onslow was just near enough to the outskirts of London to allow its inhabitants to get out into the country, and two or three times Gerald wandered along with them on one of their walks in that same strange mood of peace and contentment which he had felt when he was with them before. John was still botanizing enthusiastically, getting most of his lore from Margaret, and it pleased Gerald somehow to chaff them both on this amiable preoccupation. He would, for instance, pluck a piece of Groundsel or Sow-thistle, or some other flower of which he himself did not know the name, and twiddling it learnedly in his fingers, christen it Pharnabazus Oxyrhinchi, or anything else equally ridiculous, which occurred to him on the spur of the moment or had been thought out with an interior chuckle a few minutes before.

This tranquillity, or rather positive happiness, which Gerald experienced in the company of the Trinders, remained oddly unaffected by something which he discovered in the course of his visit. This was that John himself was not quite so serene as he had been before. He spoke in such a way as to show that all the time he was inwardly straining a little, tugging at something, which he could not manage to move. In fact, his hungry desire to get into touch with people as a whole was not finding satisfaction. He revealed to Gerald that he regarded the men's discussion-class which he had started as being practically a failure, in spite of a fairly regular and numerous attendance. His complaint was that they all, himself included, simply spoke in a guarded and abstract way, of doctrine and the history of the Church and that, when they went away, he did not feel he knew them any better than at the beginning.

"It's too much like a debating society!" he said. "You don't feel the things we talk about really matter to them. And yet there is something that matters to them that makes them come to Church: only I can't get at it! I begin to wonder if I ever shall!"

Gerald suggested that the power of being able to talk simply about what matters to you is something that has to be acquired; it needs a special education.

"Yes," burst out John, "but it's just that reservation of all the important things—even of intimate friendship—to the 'highbrow', that I can't stand. It's not natural, and doesn't correspond with the real facts."

They spoke further of the increasingly sharp division of society into 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow', and Gerald was quite astonished at the personal anguish which John revealed. The feeling was too far foreign to himself for him to be able to enter into it, yet he saw that in John it was no affectation.

At the same time he suspected that there was something else at the bottom of John's uneasiness and very soon discovered that he was right. Evidently there were slight differences of opinion between him and Margaret. John did not speak openly of these differences, but occasionally revealed them by implication. And the freshness of the pain which cried out from between his words on these occasions touched Gerald very deeply, though he was privately convinced that it would have been a much more serious matter for both of them, if there were no differences of opinion.

John showed Marston the manuscript of a sermon which he had preached in the previous Christmas week. It concluded with a vivid, imaginatively drawn, picture of the Christmas Tree, and spoke of the light from its candles as the 'soul of the world shining through its eyes.' Christ himself, John had said, is the soul of the world, and he believed the time would come, when we should see the light with our own eyes, not only in the Christmas tree, but in all trees, and indeed in the whole of Nature.

It was poetically conceived and expressed with restraint, and Gerald could not help liking it, though the theological atmosphere was foreign to him. It appeared, however, that John's vicar had felt differently. He had warned him that the tendency to substitute 'vague poetry' for simple Christianity was sufficiently widespread in the world already and ought not, in his opinion, to receive any encouragement within the Church. He had also taken this opportunity to request John to introduce the bare word 'Christ' less often into his discourses, substituting more reverent periphrases, such as 'Our Lord' or 'Our Blessed Saviour'.

Gerald guessed too, from various little indications, that Margaret had been rather disposed to agree with the vicar in disliking this sermon, though not for precisely the same reasons. Unfortunately the slight difference of taste had been emphasized by her having at about the same time organized a little entertainment, to be given by the children of the parish, which was locally written and endeavoured to present the Great Event in such a way as to render it easily comprehensible to children. John had found this cheaply sentimental, and Margaret — though she would have agreed, had they seen it somewhere for the first time together — refused, out of a certain practical and loyal element in her nature, to associate herself with his fault-finding.

From these incidents there was growing up between them a series of reciprocal assumptions, that often lay at the back of things they said — or perhaps did not say — to one another. John tended to assume that Margaret saw Christianity primarily as a kind of allegory of the Goodness of the heart — a conception which he found arid and even destructive. Margaret, on the other hand, seemed to impute to John a high-falutin' mysticism, which could only be comprehensible to himself, and possibly to a few other intellectuals — certainly not to poor people and children. Against this unspoken accusation of exclusiveness John was more than powerless, since it was the very feature in the Church, and indeed in the world as a whole, which he himself found most distasteful. This did not prevent him from asking himself if the accusation might not be true; and he had to admit that it partly was. His own Christianity, then, was a highbrow preserve? This hurt horribly. And yet his whole being cried out against cheap synopses, which seek to cut down the mystery

to the level of the simple, instead of raising the simple to the level of the mystery, and which perhaps end by killing it altogether! Thus, not only did his difference with Margaret cause them both pain, but Margaret unwittingly occupied the unpleasant position of one who kills a beautiful theory with an ugly fact. It was her attitude, which kept on drawing his attention to this unresolved discord in the depths of his own religious being. Altogether, he was torn — as Gerald well perceived by the uneasy, sometimes almost feverish, determination with which he applied himself to work.

At the end of a pleasant week, Gerald left them, and returned to the flat, en route for the North. He debated whether he should call on Janet to say good-bye, as he had seen her so regularly during the last two months, and did not quite know when they might meet again. But he decided that there was no need for such a formality, and that Janet herself would be the last to expect it. Next day he caught the morning train from Kings Cross.

CHAPTER XXVII

Janet had heard from Gerald, during his last visit, that his father was now leaving the home. He had, however, said nothing of his own projected journey to the North, which at the time was still unfixed. Consequently she was not really surprised at the cessation of his visits. Everything went on just as before. But one day about a fortnight later, her heart jumped a little when she heard the postman's knock; and then for the first time she realised that these knocks had become crises in her day. She was constantly hoping to hear from Gerald, and as constantly disappointed.

Just as one first becomes conscious of the shape and position of a tooth, when it has been extracted, so it was only now they had ceased that Janet began to realise how much these casual visits and conversations had meant to her. She had had so many new thoughts and feelings to grapple with during the last eight weeks! Yet in most of them what Gerald had said, and perhaps, too, something of the way he had looked when he said it, appeared to be very curiously entangled. At the beginning of that eight weeks Janet had suddenly entered a haven of refuge from the internal storms which had been buffeting her, and she had been far too much occupied in enjoying the luminous beauty with which its tranquil waters were saturated to enquire very precisely of what stuff the breakwaters were builded. Now that these latter showed signs of crumbling, it was a different matter.

Her thoughts, when she was alone, began to run in different channels, and that thrilling, almost impatient response to the simplicities of Nature, the air, the light, or the melancholy surface of water, which had become such a cherished feature of her walks, had a way of converging in her imagination, to a point, which proved to be some expression or attitude of Marston's or a memory of the intonation with which he had spoken some particular sentence; while this in turn often led to the invention of some special reason why he had not written or called again, that is to say, some reason other than the obvious one — that he was indifferent whether he had news of her or not.

And, instead of coming to a close in that half-painful, half-thrilling impatience, these moods would often end nowadays in one bitter drawn-out

anguish of longing. Nor was there anything indefinite about this longing. Janet knew quite well now that she was in love — as deeply in love as anyone could ever have been. And, when once or twice, the thought came to her that such an uninvited passion was traditionally supposed to be immodest, she was almost surprised at her own absolute indifference to the tradition. She now felt an absolute confidence in herself, not only that she should never be led to behave immodestly, but that there was nothing, nothing at all at the bottom of her heart, of which she need be ashamed. It was some time, however, before she realised this conviction to the full. When the true nature of her feeling for Gerald first began to dawn on her, she had still not lost a certain habitual fear of her own imagination, her own sentiment — a timid feeling that they needed constantly keeping in check. If therefore she sought at this time to recover the marvellous sense of spiritual well-being, she would at the same time try to cut out from it, all that had been secretly connected with him. And then she would fail to feel anything at all!

But as this new feeling of strong confidence in herself — confidence in the real 'holiness' of the heart's affections, broke through the bonds of ancient habit and took full possession of her, she no longer made this attempt at excision. She let herself go, as it were, and made no further effort to prevent his image from subtly entangling itself with every moment of her experience. And now sometimes the old loving bliss in the fresh caress of the breeze came back to her, and came back more wonderfully than before, yet in a different form. For now it was partly based on a mysterious sense of being with him, in a way which she could not understand, and without his knowledge. Or she experienced anew that lift of her breast and the singing thrill of joy in the morning light of the sun about her head, and was quite aware all the time that it was not only the light that was entering into her and clarifying her flesh to the transparency of spirit, but also a certain unspoken hope of one day being with him again, and with him in a way that there would no longer be any difficulty in understanding.

All day he was there. Only in different forms according to her mood. Normally she found in his face, in spite of its adult ugliness, something pathetic and almost babyish, but often at night, just as she was falling asleep, or in the early morning, as she rubbed her eyes, it would be present to her with a curiously stern and wise expression upon it, which was at the same time extraordinarily comforting. Never at any time did Janet feel anything approaching to worship of Gerald Marston. Nothing that her heart said to her was incompatible with a definite dislike she felt for a certain silliness in his nature, a giggling, punning element into which he would suddenly relapse, without warning. Nor did she lose an impatience, which she had felt since their visit together, at the solemnity with which he and Humphrey evidently regarded their own activities. You felt that, in their view, it was of considerable importance to the Universe that they should have decided to live together and talk about it!

But this critical openness of her eyes made no difference at all to the pitiful vacuum in her heart, whose clamour grew more and more insistent, as the time passed and still there came no news. Gradually hope — in so far as it was hope of a union in the ordinary sense — ebbed away, and in the same proportion the omnipresence of the image of Gerald in her experience became purely painful. She

began to regard the next meeting with him, which must of course come sooner or later, as the fateful day in her life.

It came round about Christmas, unexpectedly, at Onslow; and in the first five minutes Janet knew as clearly as if she had read it in the stars, that the only possible thing to do was to abandon all hope. She went home and in the next months suffered, as she thought, more terribly than she had ever done before. A kind of darkness seemed to creep into the very air. She no longer found fictitious tragedies meaningless, and could not understand how she should ever have done so. On the contrary, the contemplation of them, besides the eternal tragedy in great music, was at this time her principal consolation. To see her own sorrow merely as one small example of the long-drawn-out and meaningless agony of creation sometimes relieved its pressure, but more often it made her own despair more boundless. Meaningless? All her feeling and memory cried No! but her habits of thought said Yes! And, in spite of the new system of irrational 'assumptions' which had begun to take hold of her mind, she had by no means given up all confidence in these habits. At this time Janet could only look back on her former self with amazement and disgust. She was literally unable to comprehend how she could ever have so exaggerated her particular misfortunes, serious as they were, to the exclusion of everyone else's. She thought of Gerald's father and of many others, whom she knew, who lived in constant physical pain.

Her readiness to despair of ever achieving the personal happiness, which fate had dangled for a moment before her eyes, was remarkable considering the intensity of her feelings, and the new fearlessness in her attitude upon such matters. But she had begun so long ago to tame herself to the idea of being ineligible for marriage that the thought had now become almost a part of her. She was moreover considerably older than Marston. It is possible, however, that in spite of these considerations Janet might have come to an inner decision (especially on account of the remarkable opportunity which fate, shortly afterwards, seemed to throw at her head) to go boldly forward and 'take her chance.' What finally stood in her way and induced her to withstand even this temptation was another of those curious 'assumptions', which seemed just now to descend from nowhere and to become parts of her mind, and even of her memory, before she had time to examine their credentials.

In this case the assumption was as follows: Even if Marston's own feelings were different, even if he implored her to unite her life to his, it would not be correct to obey. It was not somehow intended that her relation with him should be of this kind. In the same way — that is to say, not with her reason — she felt that their relation to one another was already a desperately close one, although he did not know it — that it was of great importance to them both, and would become even more important. But — it must not become a marriage-relation. Had Marston actually made a proposal, no doubt all these mysterious 'assumptions' would have gone to the winds pretty quickly. Nevertheless they were the decisive factor in determining a step which she took shortly afterwards, and which undoubtedly removed such an event a long way farther from the bounds of possibility than it need have been.

Early in the New Year she received a letter from Humphrey, on whom the change in her manner at their last meeting had made a deep impression.

Dear Equality,

I wonder how you are getting on. Probably you are as sick of boarding-houses as Marston and I are of flats. At any rate, to come straight to the point, what about all three setting up shop together somewhere? What do you think? I expect this will come a bit suddenly, but we hope you will think it over carefully before you decide anything. We have talked it over at length. We get on very well together and don't want to separate, but I thought it would be jolly if you and I could join forces again — and he has no objection — quite the reverse!

By the way, as regards the matter on which we split — I rather gathered last time we met that you don't feel quite so strongly about it as you did; but in any case — I'm not making any contracts of course, but I may as well say I don't think you will find much to complain of. As a matter of fact I am changing my opinions a good deal and fed up with a good many things I was interested in. At least I think I am — I don't quite know where I am at the moment. But anyhow — in that matter, it's all right. Do think over our ('my' crossed out) suggestion and let me know before next month, when our Agreement runs out.

Here Humphrey had begun to write 'your affectionate brother', but he had crossed this out in order to add

Marston says he is really not equal, all alone, to the business of keeping me brushed. He says he goes on till the brush "drops from his nerveless fingers", but he can't guarantee to keep his promise any longer unaided.

Your affectionate brother,
Humphrey.

At the first reading of this letter, Janet regarded it as absolute proof that she had been mistaken in abandoning hope. Gerald had sent her a message! She felt as if weights had been lifted from her breast, and fluttered with excitement. From this it could be but a step to his falling at her feet! But the more often she read it, the more clearly she saw how absurdly she deceived herself. At once therefore she beckoned to her side that grim Familiar, who now came upon so light a summons — the determination to look the worst full in the face — and she put aside all such pleasant but groundless fancies. There remained two things, the delightful fact that Humphrey had written such a letter (she was particularly touched by his reverting to the old nickname) and the question of what action she should take. Instead of answering the letter at once, she brought herself to put it aside for a few days, while she went on with her ordinary occupations.

Dear Fraternity, (she wrote to Humphrey at the end of that time)

I have thought about your letter, which made me happy. I am sick of the boarding-house. But I have come to the conclusion that I had better not do what you suggest, though I am afraid I can't explain why. I don't really know myself. I think perhaps we are rather like each other underneath, for I 'don't quite know where I am just now' either. I am sorry, as it would have been lovely to be together again, and I think it is what father would have liked. I am going to try and get a complete change.

About the second thing, I do feel just as strongly as I did before. Only I seem to feel other things more strongly still. So that I dare say, even if you had not said what you did, it need no longer stand in the way of our living together. I believe absolutely you are trying your hardest to find out what is right and to do it, and I should be a silly sister if I thought that was easy. Think of me, when you have time!

Your loving sister,
Janet.

P.S. Tell Mr. Marston I am sorry to leave him in the lurch; but perhaps an automatic clothes-brush would really suit his purpose better. I will subscribe to this.

When she had posted this letter, Janet felt that she had resisted temptation. She also felt the utter joylessness which only too often succeeds such a moral victory; and in her case this was greatly enhanced by a lack of confidence in the rightness of her decision. Before she wrote the letter, all she could say was that she would probably feel even more uncertain, if she had taken any other decision. Now that it was written and posted, she was more than ever inclined to feel the absurdity of basing actions, in which her whole happiness might be at stake, upon these vague interior promptings — promptings which, upon scientific analysis, would probably turn out to be no more than some hereditary maggot in the brain. Many times she wished she could recover the letter and change her mind.

Altogether the double world in which Janet was obliged to live at this time — on the one hand the judgments based on her training and previous habits of thought, and on the other that entirely different set, based on curious assumptions, which had no birth-certificates to show, but which, if they were ignored, clamoured with a deafening noise the tidings of their own reality — this double world was beginning to exhaust her mind and deprive her of all sense of initiative. Accompanied, as it was, by the present great strain on her feelings, it had made her decide that things could not go on as they were. She meant what she said, therefore, in her letter to Humphrey, about trying for a change. Above all she wished, for the present, to avoid meeting Gerald again.

For at times her sense of a perfect affinity with him grew so strong as to bear down all other considerations. And then she felt she could not quite trust herself. At such times she would feel as if she understood, in its finest nuances, every thought and every emotion in his soul, that it was not merely a crime, but a grotesque miscarriage of truth that he should not be hers. At such times the longing grew terrible indeed. Only that nowadays, beneath it, somewhere or other, lay the

memory of that wonderful eight weeks. And then everything in her world seemed to turn on the subtle point that she had had her escape from hysterics before and not after his arrival that day. The wonder, the eagle wings of those eight weeks could not all, therefore, be Gerald in disguise. This was her comfort. Or was it? In another sense she wanted it to be all Gerald!

One night, a month or so after she had written to her brother, this feeling of complete affinity, or inevitable, predestined unity with Gerald became so agitating as to make sleep impossible. At last, completely eaten up by it, she rose and went to her writing-table, where her eyes streaming with tears, she wrote him a long letter in which she explained how she had only refused Humphrey's request under the influence of some absurd aberrations of fancy, and went on to explain her conviction that their destinies were interwoven. She felt absolutely certain, as she wrote, that he must see it in the same light the moment it was pointed out to him. At last she returned to bed with a feeling of relief and slept heavily.

Next morning she re-read the letter in utter amazement, scarcely believing that it could have been written by herself, and of course burnt it immediately. But the incident left its mark on her. She was troubled. She no longer felt the same confidence in herself, and began at once to take steps towards getting away. Remembering how Gerald had obtained his work for the Encyclopedia, she wrote to Margaret, asking if she could possibly give her any assistance. And Margaret replied in a few days that she had heard from Sir Otto, who had promised to bear the matter in mind.

CHAPTER XXVIII

At about ten o'clock in the morning Richard Metcalfe left his room, in which he had been sitting over the breakfast-table with the Times, brushed his hat and coat, chose one of two different-coloured pairs of spats, and then issued forth and walked quickly with rather a buoyant step through St. James's park to Westminster. He always enjoyed this morning walk, for at the start of the day he felt especially young and confident and successful. This morning he enjoyed it even more than usual; and he scanned with interest the private car which drove out of Buckingham Palace, as he passed, to see if it contained any face he knew. When he arrived at his chief's house, he went through the usual routine of reading the letters and answering straight away those which did not need to go any farther. Generally each answer took a certain amount of thought and tact; for those which required no more than a perfunctory acknowledgment never reached him. But this morning, since they were short-handed, he had to read all the letters. In nine cases out of ten the answer was simply a matter of explaining why nothing could be done, without giving the real reason.

After that there were two or three people to interview. Metcalfe's peculiar *métier* was interviewing the type of person who must be disappointed without being made to feel disobliged. His exceptionally pleasant face and manner, together with a slightly deferential youthfulness, made him ideally adapted to this purpose, and he not infrequently received social invitations, shortly afterwards, from people who had first been charmed by the smile with which he sent them empty-handed

away. At one o'clock he hurried off to St. James's to keep an engagement of a different kind, round which his thoughts had been playing a good deal during the morning. Ascending the comfortable steps of a large club, he enquired at the bureau for Sir Otto Hudson. Sir Otto had not yet arrived. But Metcalfe had only waited five minutes in the smoking-room when he came in with a smile and conducted his visitor to lunch.

This was the first time Metcalfe had actually lunched with Sir Otto, though he had been at the wedding reception, and they had met once or twice in other peoples' houses and exchanged a few words. The conversation was light and various. From the Russian Ballet, via a certain eccentric critic, it passed to the more modern kind of contemporary literature. Metcalfe, who liked to be able to mention names, referred to Adela Cranage and said he understood her previous admirers were anxious about the change in her style, since she was apparently giving up writing in any recognizable metre, or with any recognizable meaning. Sir Otto evidently knew very little about this minor celebrity, and Metcalfe explained how some of these same admirers objected strongly to her latest venture, which was the taking on of the dramatic criticism in a fashionable society paper. He spoke with ease and confidence and could not help feeling that he was now being righteously rewarded for having continued to keep in touch with the literary friends he had made at college. Sir Otto seemed interested and evidently surprised at the extent of Adela's fame.

"I must have her down to Klosters" he said: "Danvers is sure to know her!" "By the way" he added, perceiving an opportunity to reach his first objective: "My wife is anxious to know if you will give us that pleasure yourself some day!" Metcalfe assented with gratitude, only stipulating in mock terror that he should not be invited the same week-end as Miss Cranage. The gratitude was discreet, but unfeigned. Metcalfe was enjoying this luncheon, and he liked Sir Otto Hudson. Moreover, though he himself had only seen Klosters once, on the occasion of Margaret's wedding, to which he had been invited because he was staying in the neighbourhood, he had noticed that, in more than one case, an invitation thither had marked a sort of chrysalis stage in a successful career.

The conversation flitted pleasantly on from topic to topic, saved in each case from total superficiality by the fact that either Metcalfe or Hudson was personally acquainted with somebody of importance in the sphere of discourse. For some years now Metcalfe had instinctively educated himself in such a way as to be able to show acquaintance with the projects and ideas of the cranks and modernists in every conceivable department of life, while at the same time preserving in his own attitude a certain amused aloofness from them all. It pleased him to be able to make full use of this training, and to hear Sir Otto's deep-toned, appreciative 'ha! ha!' ring out again and again from the other side of the table.

Meanwhile Hudson was leading the conversation round by easy stages to the subject he specially wanted to discuss. He had very little difficulty. Metcalfe himself was the first to mention the 'Consumer Finance' scheme, which was at that time supported by a small but tenacious body of reforming cranks. Their contention was that, owing to the enormous increase in the development of labour-saving machinery during the last fifty years of western civilisation, poverty was actually no longer necessary. Its continued survival was due solely to a flaw in the economic

system, which automatically brought it about that there was never enough money in the hands of consumers to purchase more than a fraction of the commodities which a modern civilisation is able to produce.

"Of course," said Sir Otto, "it's wholesale inflation — inflation with a false nose on to disguise it."

"Well," replied Metcalfe, "they say their scheme is different from anybody else's, because they make price-regulation an integral part of it!"

"Yes," said Hudson, with a smile, "that's what I say, with a false nose on! As if nobody had ever tried fixing prices before! Drinks all round, and pay to-morrow! has always been a popular doctrine!" Metcalfe grinned. "Drinks all round and never pay at all!" he corrected. "They talk about 'Loans' that are never to be paid back. You see, they mean to do the thing properly!" Sir Otto now leaned across the table with a slightly confidential air.

"The curious thing is —" he said, "that now and then a bee like that should get into the bonnet of a really intelligent man, a really first-class mind! If it does — apparently he's lost for ever. They get as obstinate as mules. You can take my word for that. I've seen it."

Hudson was now taking a keen pleasure in the conversation. That spontaneous delight, which Margaret had apparently inherited, in the exercise of tact and social skill, simply for its own sake, was at least beginning to work in his blood; his long fingers began to manipulate the knife and fork and to crumble the bread with increasing deftness, and for an instant he recalled a peculiarly pleasurable moment in his life — a few years back — on a holiday — casting his fly on to a glittering trout-stream and at the same instant luxuriating in the first few puffs at his morning pipe. Very gently now he began to 'pump' Metcalfe on the opinions and plans of Alfred Streeter, a prominent member of His Majesty's opposition.

Metcalfe was at that time confidential secretary to Dodge, Leader of the Opposition and ex Prime Minister. Dodge, however, who had amassed a considerable amount of wealth in the course of his career and was now getting old, was about to retire from political life in England, and live abroad in a more suitable climate, taking his secretarial staff with him and dedicating his remaining energies to the cause of international peace. It was the practice at that time, when a party was out of office, for it to retain nevertheless what was called a 'shadow' Ministry, so that everyone knew who would be Prime Minister, Home Secretary etc. when the party was next returned, whether the individuals in question had held such office before or not. Streeter, who had not yet held office, was the 'shadow' Chancellor of the Exchequer of the Industrial party, and, with Dodge's retirement, there was some possibility of his becoming the shadow Prime Minister.

What interested Hudson at the moment was a rumour he had just heard of Streeter's conversion to this 'Consumer Finance' scheme. Metcalfe soon revealed his opinion that Streeter was indeed more than interested and might quite possibly endeavour to make it a 'plank' in the party's next election programme. As soon as he was certain of this, Sir Otto, speaking in a slightly different tone of voice, pronounced that any such move on Streeter's part would make, not only him, but the whole party extremely unpopular in the City. He then intimated that he had no

objection whatever to Metcalfe's repeating this opinion of his (of course it was no more than an opinion) to Dodge or any other of the Industrials.

His change of tone was deliberate, but at the same time it did not come off quite as he had intended. For his manner, instead of the business-like impressiveness he had intended, actually betrayed a certain pleased, child-like importance. He had not been able to silence the jovial note in his present harmonious mood, and Metcalfe, responding to this jovial note, as well as to the afterglow from the Sparkling Hock which had flowed between them, replied: "Yes, I'll tell Mr. Dodge," and added half chaffingly, "It seems to me, Sir, we take our orders from you!"

Sir Otto said nothing, did not even look anything, yet the moment he had made this remark, Metcalfe felt from the atmosphere that he had committed a gaucherie and wished intensely that he could take his last words back. During the silence Hudson, who at any rate knew his own weakness, quietly cursed himself for having let this absurd self-satisfaction run away with him, and resolved to keep it in better check another time. At length he responded in a much graver and quieter voice, and in such a way as to make Metcalfe feel that he was being let down very gently.

"We may sometimes be the means of reminding you of the laws of nature — or of political economy!" he began, and then suddenly saw a way of using the results of his recent mistake, and at once set out on it. While young Metcalfe was still feeling awkward and embarrassed over his faux pas, Sir Otto mentioned that he was at present looking out for a job for a lady of some character, whose language qualifications might make her useful to Dodge, now that he was going abroad. "Miss Trinder," he explained, "my daughter's sister-in-law. I expect you met her at the wedding." Metcalfe explained that he had seen her there but had not spoken to her, and Sir Otto immediately pressed his point hard into his visitor's weakened defences. He knew, he said, that Dodge had just lost a valuable under-secretary; and intelligent English ladies willing to remain abroad indefinitely were not so easy to come by. Metcalfe thanked him humbly and promised to use his influence with Dodge. Soon afterwards they parted.

Sir Otto, who was due at a Directors' meeting at half-past three, took in Killigrew's office on his way to the City, and asked the latter confidentially about the work of the Committee of Enquiry, whose report had recently been published, and its recommendations adopted. This committee had been set up to deal with the parlous state of a huge industrial concern, which had fallen into difficulties since the War and post-War booms. Killigrew explained that the committee had unanimously recommended a drastic writing-down of the concern's capital value, and he went on to complain humourously of the number of letters he had since received from small shareholders, whose income was of course reduced by something like half, and who wrote as if they had been robbed of something that belonged to them!

"Between you and me," he told Hudson, "the committee was a pure waste of time! It was quite obvious from the first what they would do. Oh yes, one member did cause a certain amount of trouble with some nonsense about the plant having already been paid for five times — said it meant cheating the shareholders and

increasing unemployment. You know, the usual inflationist blurb!" He looked at Hudson, who, however, did not smile.

"You call it blurb," he replied. "I don't think you quite realise how widespread it is!"

"Oh, surely! A few currency cranks here and there — we always get them after a War!"

"Did you know that Streeter himself has gone over to the Consumer Finance Group?"

"Streeter!"

"Oh well, yes!" added Killigrew, recovering himself, "I can't help it, if the country is to be governed by lunatics. Really, Hudson, what does it all mean? I'm not a pig-headed man? I've tried to read one of their books and I couldn't even understand it! They talk stark screaming balderdash!" There was a pause.

"It's not quite true that you can't help it!" said Sir Otto.

"How do you mean?"

"Well, you write a column every day. When people read what you write, they are thinking principally of — safety. They will listen to your opinions as respectfully as to anyone's in the country."

Of his own accord Killigrew said he thought he would devote the whole of next Saturday's 'City Notes' to the subject, and Sir Otto stayed for some time discussing the matter with him. Killigrew's own idea was to write a two-column article, in which he would simply pulverise with ridicule Messrs. Hicks and Cameron and their 'Consumer Finance' tomfoolery once and for all. But he agreed, when Sir Otto pointed out that it would probably be better not to mention either of these gentlemen by name, thus affording them gratuitous advertisement. And he even undertook to see that their names never were mentioned in any paper with which he had anything to do. This would not be difficult for the editors, under whom he worked were invariably willing to excise anything which he told them would frighten advertisers away. As soon as Hudson had left him, therefore, Killigrew settled down to this article, which he entitled 'Currency Cranks.'

He enjoyed writing it. He mentioned no names, but poured a great deal of bluff ridicule on to two classes of currency-cranks, the first of which he labelled Money-eaters and the second Money-fishers. The first believed that you could actually eat and drink money, so that all that was necessary, in order to bring about the millennium, was to print an unlimited quantity of it. The others, the Money-fishers, really were capable of seeing that money is only a medium of exchange, but in spite of this, they believed that somewhere or other there was a bottomless pit, out of which an unlimited quantity of this real money could be drawn.

After making play with these two types of ass for as long as he chose, Killigrew wound up on a rather more serious note, pointing out how the stability of our national credit was endangered by the mere discussion of such ideas, should the foreigner be led to believe that any responsible person in this country actually took them seriously. What was credit after all but confidence? And in the financial world, as everyone knew, a mere rumour was often enough to destroy confidence. For the initial disturbance of confidence, which the rumour caused, (by attracting capital away from the suspected quarter) often brought about a condition of affairs which

actually justified lack of confidence; and thus, by the time the false rumour was dispelled, it might be a true one! He recommended these considerations to all who had the maintenance of our national credit at heart. Credit was like a moment in the game of spillikins. The only safety was to keep absolutely still — hardly to breathe. He was no scaremonger. Nevertheless he was convinced that one of the best investments any government could make at the present moment would be the systematic dissemination of elementary economic instruction to the masses.

CHAPTER XXIX

Gerald returned to London in the late Autumn and spent the winter in the same unsettled condition, hanging about, writing a little, and hoping for regular work. The possibility of his succeeding as a freelance now looked remoter than ever, and he had moreover an uneasy feeling that he was getting vaguely into Humphrey's debt over the arrangements for the flat, especially as he had paid no rent all the time he was away. Soon after he got back, on the strength of Lord Bilbury's encouraging letter, he wrote to him, suggesting various other articles he would like to tackle for the Encyclopedia and mentioning that he was on the look out for any other work of the same kind. To this letter he received no answer and, after waiting till close on Easter, he wrote once more, making no reference to his former letter, but enquiring after his article on Carlyle, of which he had as yet received no proof. About a fortnight later he was delighted to receive a bulky envelope from the hands of the postman. He opened it and found inside the manuscript of his article, with the following typewritten note attached to it:

Dear Mr. Marston,

I must sincerely apologise for the oversight by which this manuscript has been kept so long. In regard to my previous letter you will of course understand that, though I may have expressed an opinion, I am not actually an editor of the World's Encyclopedia. Unfortunately these gentlemen, after due consideration, feel unable to make use of your article, and have returned it to me to forward to you with their best thanks for the privilege of being permitted to read it. I should suggest — again, of course, purely as my own opinion — that its merits were outweighed in their eyes by your over-persistent tendency to fly off into an exploded Bergsonism.

Believe me,

Yours etc.

Bilbury.

Gerald read this note with his heart in his boots, thinking of all those weeks of wasted work. And when he looked at it again and compared it with his memory of Bilbury's previous letter, he was absolutely nonplussed and even turned over the piece of notepaper, as if he expected to find something funny trying to push through from behind. The more he thought of it, the more he found the whole affair not merely annoying but positively suspicious; especially as he had, from his personal

interview, an instinctive conviction that his Lordship had never read a line of Bergson, or exploded anything, in his life.

His disappointment was horrible. Indeed he himself had been quite unaware till this moment how much he had been using his expectations in this direction as a counter-weight to the numerous other disappointments. He stood there with the letter in one hand, the other resting on the table, and gradually sank into a darker and darker mood of despondency. It was no longer merely his own failure to get a hearing that oppressed him. All his old disappointment at the bald-headed, after-dinner atmosphere of contemporary literature returned with renewed force, and alongside of it a new sensation of active distrust. He had known well enough before that the bulk of periodic literature was simply bought to fill up the spaces between the advertisements, but this was the first time he had seriously suspected that even the learned world might be tainted in the same way. Must one even there write what one was told? The implications (if he were right) of such a state of affairs suddenly appalled him. And the future! But perhaps it was all imagination. A cynical hopelessness and a desire for immediate pleasure came over him. If the way into the public ear was really too sinuous for any but the earwigs — well, why not become an earwig oneself? Perhaps he had simply been trying to take life too seriously.

A few months ago he might, in such a dark mood, have looked for comfort to his fellowship with Humphrey's positive nature and robust will. But Gerald was feeling at present somewhat estranged from Humphrey. The latter had recently discovered yet another egregious foreigner, into whose writings he had plunged head over ears, until he had become, as far as Gerald was concerned, practically lost to view. This time it was an Austrian named Brockmann, and Gerald could not for the life of him make out whether Brockmann claimed to be a psychologist, a philosopher, an historian, a doctor, an astrologer, or a prophet with a new religion. One thing was certain, if only from the number of pies into which the solemn Teutonic finger had been inserted — that the man must be a very palpable quack. It was disappointing to have to sit by and watch Humphrey going right off the rails like this, especially after the additional confidence which he had lately begun to feel in the latter's ability. And in this case it was not even possible to argue with him, for the omniscient Brockmann did not, apparently, condescend to adduce any evidence in support of his statements, but delivered them all in the form of flat assertions, to be taken or left as the hearer chose. The only pleading to which he would stoop was to accuse anyone who disagreed with him of prejudice. Humphrey emphatically denied that he believed everything this man said, merely because he said it; nevertheless he went on reading and reading and seemed unable to think or talk of anything else. The possibility of intelligent conversation with him appeared, therefore, to be drawing rapidly to a close.

Gerald felt horribly lonely. He wandered aimlessly round the room and at last picked up a number of the so-called Society paper, The Rout, which Humphrey for some unknown reason had brought in with him yesterday. The journal had increased in size lately, blossoming forth into aesthetic sections, so that you might find a critique of a new edition of Paradise Lost between a page of hunting photographs and a column on the Spring fashions. And the critique would be written in such a way as to suggest: Yes, Paradise Lost is important, but we should not let it

make us lose sight of the importance of Hunt-balls. The really cultured man, or woman, will be equally interested in both etc. etc.

Gerald found a review, signed by Adela Cranage, of somebody's autobiography. The somebody was still alive, as were also most of the people whose private lives she discussed. Gerald ran his eye down the page and kept on coming on such words as 'indiscreet', 'dangerous', 'daring', especially 'daring'. Again the feeling of nausea arose in him. He knew nothing of Adela Cranage's relations with Humphrey. All he did know was that this woman had begun some years ago, trying to write serious poetry. It was unoriginal enough, but it was at any rate sincere; she was a widely read woman and had obviously been trying her best to tell the truth about her experience. Since then he had seen her name, perhaps once in four months, in different periodicals and yet he seemed to have been able to follow as clearly as if he had met and spoken to her every day the development of her character. And now she had come down to this fooling, vulgar dishonesty in the use of words! He knew perfectly well that Adela Cranage knew as well as he did the kind of risks this sort of 'daring' involved in the Twentieth Century — the risk of being talked about, the risk of a greatly increased circulation, the risk of popularity, the risk of being invited out to dinner, the risk of being humbly implored to write other books of the same kind at an increased Royalty rate, and so on. Nobody had ever called him daring for affirming that Pierre Marcel (a grotesquely decadent French writer, before whom it was fashionable to prostrate oneself) was feeble-minded, yet he knew, and Adela Cranage must know also, that this was the only kind of literary sincerity for which real courage was nowadays required — the only kind which brought serious economic and social consequences in its train.

All of a sudden he threw the magazine across the room and looked at his watch. There was just time. He would cut right away for the afternoon and go out somewhere, to a *matinée*, to something light, to a *Revue*. It might lead to something . . . some distracting experience. He got his hat and coat and went off with his hands plunged deep in the pockets and his head down. It was horrible. He seemed to walk surrounded by a sort of gilded scummy glimmer, which was at the same time half-alive and feeling after him with great groping octopus tentacles. And it seemed impossible that he should ever be able to resist these tentacles; for they were himself. His own will, even his very judgment, became the beast, feeling and feeling about and seeking to destroy the last traces of that other stupid faithful schoolboy self, which craved to go on regarding its own illusions as the moral laws of the universe. Once more he thought of Adela Cranage. What possible right had he, then, to blame her? Suppose she had no private income, like himself? Suppose she had had to become an earwig in order to live! Yes, and suppose all these shiverings and shakings of his were morbid nonsense, and all the time it was the earwigs who, urbane, undeceived, and after all not ill-natured, were living the Good Life! How long should he himself have held out without that little bit of private income? "Held out!" held out against what? Puritan! Say not the struggle nought availeth — ah, the labour and the wounds are vain — ah! He gave up thinking and relapsed into a colourless, idea-less gloom.

By this time he was standing in the queue at the pit door. It was in the neighbourhood of Covent Garden, and he began idly watching a couple of fruit-

porters stooping over a bale on the other side of the road. The stone-paven street between was untidy with scraps of coloured paper and cardboard. Wisps of straw blew up and down it rather drearily, sometimes taking the eye up with them to the staring sash-windows of unfurnished rooms which looked down on the street. One knew somehow that the bare boards behind those windows were littered with further scraps of paper and crinkled cardboard and straw. The whole scene was only relieved a little by the curiously gentle smell of fruit which pervaded all the air.

While Gerald was looking at the one remaining brace-button which secured the torn trousers of one of the stooping porters, a diversion occurred. A piece of apple descended from above and caught the man on the nape of the neck; he straightened his back with a jerk and gazed up at the sky with an expression of innocent bewilderment that was extraordinarily comic. Gerald watched to see what would happen. Would the fellow get angry? He half expected to see a surly threatening expression rush in to fill the ludicrous vacancy. And then the porter suddenly perceived the source of the missile standing and grinning at him from the tailboard of a neighbouring van, and at the same time his head gave a little backward jerk of recognition, and the chalk-white cockney face broke into a brilliant smile. There was a casual, yet all-embracing friendliness in that smile which said worlds. Personal recognition, acknowledgment of the joke, a pathetic admission that we are all helpless mortals, subject to these surprising indignities, "see you again this evening!" — all were somehow blended into that tiny instantaneous look. Meanwhile the second porter, picking up the piece of apple, had thrown it back again at the man on the van, who ducked with an affable grin; after which all three men stooped to their work again. The whole incident took less than half a minute.

But it was extraordinary, the effect which it had on Gerald's spirits. For a second, they rose like corks, and then, when they sank to a more normal level, his mind seemed to have been cleared. He saw with perfect distinctness that it was absolute waste of time, his going to this revue, which would certainly consist of ten per-cent humour, forty per-cent salacity, and fifty per-cent bosh. With equal distinctness he knew that it was the salacity he had come for, and a clear voice spoke in him, saying: the proper thing for you to do is, either to find a prostitute or else to see or read or think something intelligent. The first alternative (which he had often thought of but never tried), when it came to the point, was clearly impossible; and he simply refused to brood over the question of whether it was fear or fastidiousness or virtue which restrained him. The second remained. There was a new production of *As You Like It*, with a matinée that very afternoon. It was not a favourite play, but it was something. Besides he might write on it and so try for some dramatic criticism. He broke away from the queue, therefore, and hurried off.

CHAPTER XXX

Margaret and John had now been married for more than eighteen months, and neither of them — as was indeed inevitable — had remained unchanged during that period. John himself had not hitherto noticed any alteration in Margaret, so gradually had this been taking place. But now at last he did slowly begin to realise certain subtle differences between Margaret Hudson and Margaret Trinder.

Generally speaking, she had become quieter. She indulged less often in her 'tricks' — that irresponsible mimicry, for example, or the sudden drop into cockneyisms. The hint of restlessness — a controlled, calm restlessness, which John had found so charming — seemed also to have disappeared; and she usually kept her eyes steady when she laughed or spoke to people, instead of allowing them to rove about the room. It occurred to him once to think that she had 'come down to earth', whereas before their marriage she had seemed to be hovering, half uneasily, in the atmosphere above it.

A curious development, which he found half pleasing and half disconcerting was her growing tendency to depend and lean heavily on himself. She would listen to him so respectfully and would wait to see what he was going to do. He felt that she half willed this. And it was all the stranger, all the subtler, because at the same time she seemed to be building up within herself an increasing stubbornness, an increasing inflexibility towards other people's ideas, including his own. One thing that stood out very sharply from these eighteen months of their life together was her innate loyalty. It occurred to him once that in a shipwreck, simply out of loyalty to the inanimate timbers, it would probably be harder for her to get into the last boat with the captain than to stay on board! Not that her loyalty to himself had ever, he supposed, been tried in this severe fashion, or indeed in any fashion at all. Nevertheless he could feel its passionate presence in all sorts of little gestures and intonations and actions. It was out of this loyalty, he knew, that she had turned herself into such a businesslike housekeeper. She still could not, it is true, be described as 'house-proud'; but, whatever they did in the way of entertaining, it was done with finish. When they gave a dinner-party — which was not often — Margaret was on her feet half the day, and the party went through on oiled castors. Indeed he sometimes felt as if she were becoming almost too efficient. Yet some of the happiest moments of his life were when, in the course of such a meal, himself left for a moment outside the stream of conversation, he would pause to watch her animated laughing face and feel how the light-hearted mood of the company radiated from her, as if from a kind of heart.

Sometimes John felt that all these things went so smoothly, just because, having decided that it was her 'job' to keep a properly turned-out house and husband, nothing on earth would stop her doing that job to the very best of her ability. But he could think this without being chilled, for it was a peculiarity of Margaret's that the distinction between 'duty' and 'inclination', which for a large number of people constitutes their life's problem, hardly ever arose. Once she was fully convinced that a certain course of action was her 'duty' it became in the very same instant her spontaneous inclination. And vice versa. Thus, her active loyalty to John seemed, as it were, to spread over into an equally active loyalty to the Church. Before her marriage, her attitude here had been friendly, respectful, but detached and often critical. Now it was clearly different. She said very little, but in some degree by the things she carefully avoided saying, and above all by the things she was always ready to do, she seemed to be making it her life's task to contribute to the prestige and dignity of the Church no less than to its positive activities.

It was only lately, too, that she, on her side, had noticed any alteration in John and, now that she had done so, she regarded it as merely temporary. What she felt

was that slight sense of strain, which Gerald too had observed in the previous autumn. She knew that John was uneasy in some way in his own mind and, knowing this, was sorry for him. At the same time it saddened her and perhaps made her feel a little resentful that those hours of leisure and complete relaxation — aimless country walks for example — which she loved so much, and which John too had seemed to delight in especially during their engagement, that these hours were growing so few and far between. She never wanted to shirk her own domestic or social obligations, but when they were fulfilled, she did want sometimes to find John equally 'at a loose end' and ready, so to speak, for anything. Nowadays this hardly ever happened. He always seemed to have something to do, or something he wanted to read, and if he should be free, he was preoccupied — restless. She was half sorry for him and half inclined to suspect him of making mountains out of molehills, especially as he did not seem able to speak to her much of the causes of his distress. This worried her a little. John himself, however, believed that he had often tried to guide the conversation in such a direction as would make it possible for him to explain his oppression, and that each time she had prevented him. For she would attach such hopelessly insufficient weight to some remark of his which already contained the essence of his trouble that it seemed no use going on. For if she could ever begin to understand she would have begun already.

All these little troubles — for after all they were no more than ripples on an essentially calm surface — seemed to converge to a point in their unfortunate difference of opinion on the subject of pictures. Here, more than any-where else, John thought he detected that immovable, resisting stubbornness, and Margaret on her side felt a suspicious change of outlook in John, already since their wedding. So serious was the difference that this apparently academic question of a 'meaning' in pictures had become taboo between them. They dared not mention it. Although — or perhaps because — it was a subject in which John's interests were passionately engaged, if ever it intruded into their conversations, an instinct immediately arose in Margaret to tighten up, the substance of her soul and mobilize all her resources against him.

On one occasion he had remarked, almost as something self-evident, that one only sees in a picture 'what one brings to it oneself', and was surprised, thrown quite off his balance in fact, by the force and animosity with which she opposed this conception. It was as if she had been stung. And when he insisted that it was obvious and did not even apply solely to art, she silenced him at once with a bitter argumentum ad feminam, which was really quite foreign to her habit.

"Do you only find in me what you bring yourself?" she enquired, giving him an angry glance from under her long lashes, and immediately looking away again. And the moment she had said it she could have slapped herself. But at the bottom of her soul Margaret was frightened, frightened, of tampering with the common spiritual experience which had done so much to bring them together, and frightened still more of those dim 'pictures', which sometimes arose on the horizon of her own consciousness, and which perhaps, if one were to enquire too closely, did possess a 'meaning'.

Her rigid attitude on this point gave John's affections a subtle sensation of having been snubbed. His tender devotion to her and the tenderness of heart which

he had come to associate with certain pictures would have liked, as it were, to flow together into one common stream, but were prevented from doing so by this submerged, but apparently adamant, rock which divided them. He sometimes resented this tragedy and pitied himself. Margaret little knows, he could say to himself, what she is throwing away!

Yet a pointed personal remark of this kind, if more unanswerable, was possibly less distressing than another which she made later on. Ralph Middleton spent a few days with them during the Spring. John had never been greatly attached to Margaret's old friend, in whom he detected an irresponsible dilettantism, a sort of tea-tasting attitude, as though the world were entirely composed of different blends and his sole business was to sample them. Once they had a long argument in which Trinder practically revealed this opinion, and Middleton countered by accusing him of taking himself too seriously. John forced him at length — or believed that he had forced him — to admit that his (Middleton's) whole attitude to life depended from a disbelief in immortality.

Not long after he had left, Margaret, without actually mentioning but quite obviously alluding to, the old question of meaning in pictures, made some remark concerning the great increase in 'subjectivity' since the War. It was one of the less healthy after-effects of the War — a kind of nervous disease, which would no doubt soon pass away. To John it was exquisitely painful to perceive, so clearly as he did, the cloven hoof of Middleton's intellect peeping through this transparently un-Margaret-ish remark. For a moment he experienced, almost as vividly as if he himself were Margaret, a certain buried fear of himself, which must have driven her to ferret out and adopt this idea. Clearly it was to be a sort of protective covering. It added much to his incommunicable distress that he knew — what she was evidently blind to — from what different roots this same idea was updrawn in Margaret and in Ralph Middleton respectively.

Naturally all this occupied but a small part of their time. For the most part they ate, drank, slept, talked and worked in a normally happy and healthy frame of mind. You might have spent a month with them without knowing that they had a single serious difference. The only thing you must have noticed would have been that slightly feverish, strained attitude in John himself. And this was by no means wholly, nor even principally, to his feelings as a husband. His disappointment at not having come more closely into touch with other people, with other souls, continued to gnaw at him sharply; and then other difficulties were arising out of his work, to which his own uneasy state of mind no doubt contributed. Just because of the large admixture of tact and geniality in his disposition, the social part of his work grew heavier. He always seemed to be visiting, and yet the friendships he made and the work he did did not satisfy his hunger for fellowship. A sort of obsession, which came upon him at about this time, brought him at last to a positive distaste for this very work.

The curious illusion which he experienced during his first sermon — that his congregation consisted entirely of unimpressed old ladies — had been to some extent prophetic. For it was in this connection that his other difficulties arose. The elderly ladies among his parishioners were not only the most rapacious of his time, but also the most difficult to 'deal with.' They alone were really anxious to talk of

death and the next world, and for that he liked them; yet at the same time they were the most unreceptive of other peoples' ideas and — this was the worst part of it — the most frightened. Often he came away, feeling that the whole visit, everything they had said themselves, and all that they had consented to listen to of his own words, had been determined and selected by fear. There were two cases in particular, which he could never quite get out of his mind; when he was not with them, they seemed to turn into parts of his own conscience; he fought with them; he almost dreamt about them.

These two old ladies, very different in many respects, were alike in this, that they enjoyed talking of heaven. The trouble was that 'heaven' for them (John was quite sure of this) really meant a replica of earth, a kind of luscious Omar Khayam garden, in which they themselves would figure largely, restored to whatever age it was at which they had been in the height of their maidenly charms. The moral struggles which John experienced in his relations with these two females were almost ludicrous in their intensity. He would simply sweat in his endeavours to avoid countenancing a falsehood and at the same time to avoid awakening the great Fear which suddenly leaped out of their eyes when he said anything that threatened to destroy the cherished illusion. This was particularly difficult in a subject of this kind, where he himself really did not know what was true or false, or even precisely what he thought was true. Generally he came away, with a guilty conviction that he had allowed himself to be used as a bolster for their pathetically subtle egotism to rest itself on and acquire new strength. But what could be done? How was it possible to hint the truth that stared him in the face, that, just while they talked most freely of the next world, they were clinging with their whole beings most tenaciously and anxiously to this? If ever he did manage to say anything that went home, it only made things worse. Either they grew angry, and angry in seventy-five or eighty is next door to ill — and then it became painfully clear that they would only listen and flatter up his youthful wisdom, as long as he said exactly what they were used to hearing or wanted to hear, so that he himself perhaps felt angry. Or — which was worse — they did not get angry, but simply suffered and he went away feeling — a stern moral giant? Not a bit of it: an abominable prig.

Of these two ladies John preferred the elder. Miss Butler was an Irish Spinster of eighty. Eld had hooked her face up into something approaching the 'nutcrackers', but it had not managed to destroy either her memory or her sense of humour. John liked her for this, and she returned the sentiment. But besides liking her, he gradually became, strange to say, half-afraid of her, and afraid in an extraordinary goblin sort of way.

The day after that on which Gerald went to the matinée performance of As You Like It, John had to call on Miss Butler, a duty which he did not much relish, as the last time he had been, they had had a quarrel. Having to dissociate himself from something she had said about death, John had tried to carry it off by approaching her sense of humour, but had miscalculated and failed dismally, departing at last in an atmosphere of gloom and tears. Consequently his anticipation of the present visit was not a very bright one.

He was surprised therefore to find Miss Butler in a positively merry mood. She evidently had not the smallest desire to talk of the great inevitable, regaling him

instead with horribly strong tea and a series of mildly scandalous reminiscences. John was immensely relieved, but as his short visit drew towards a close, he grew more and more ill at ease. Miss Butler had conjured up in his fancy a diaphanous vision of fan-flirting, officer-ogling Victorian girlhood, a vision which was all the more full-blooded and real for the presence of this living link, which sat close opposite to him and occasionally tapped him jocularly on the knee. And somehow the result of it was to make him painfully conscious of her present decrepitude — odd that he should feel it most when she herself was most unconscious of it! — and of something else which he hardly dared to admit even to himself. Only at the very end of his visit was he forced to admit this. He was standing, clerical hat in hand, in the open doorway, and Miss Butler had insisted in hobbling across the room to show him out, when she remembered something else, too good to be omitted even at this eleventh hour. It was a Limerick, of date unknown, and she leaned over and peered into his face, as with relish she delivered it.

There was a young lady named Finnigan,
Said: 'Mother of God, I'll not sin again.
I'll always do right
And fight the good fight —

A moment's pause, and then the old eyes glittered with meaning and the delicate, refined voice, redolent of lavender and valentines and Alfred Lord Tennyson, came triumphantly slap down on the last line:

"Och, Mother, but happen he'll win again!"

John was obliged to stare full into Miss Butler's eyes, while she recited this, the moist, cavernous eyes of extreme old age, and there was no longer any doubt at all about what he saw there. There might possibly be some doubt as to whether it was really there, but there was no doubt at all that he saw it. It was desire. Full of horror he forced his face into an appreciative grin and turned and almost ran down the stairs and out of the front door. On his way home, his thoughts played around the medieval practice of burning witches, and for the first time in his life John began to wonder if the ideas of, say, James I on this subject represented quite the pitifully crude superstition he had always supposed.

When he got in, he heard the sound of familiar voices and then Margaret's clear musical laugh, and entering the dining-room he found her talking with Humphrey and Gerald, who had looked in unexpectedly on their way back from somewhere. He saw at once that she was brilliantly happy.

"Ah!" she said, as he came in, "Here he is! I'm frightfully sorry, but I'm afraid I simply must run away and get ready for the service to-night!" She smiled brilliantly and left them, giving John's hand a private squeeze on her way out. John explained that a new font had just been installed in the Church and a special ceremonial service was to be held that evening, to bless it. He invited them to come, but saw at once from their hesitation that they would much rather not, and therefore did not press it, when Humphrey uneasily murmured some transparent excuse.

As sometimes happens with three people who know each other very well, they plunged almost immediately into an abstract, impersonal conversation. What

actually happened was, that Gerald resumed a topic which he and Humphrey had evidently broken off in the midst, when Margaret joined them; while John, at first merely a listener, gradually joined in. Gerald had evidently been describing something. "It spins a kind of long tube or funnel", he said, "and the male crawls into it, and —" he stopped and turned both his thumbs down with a grimace.

"What on earth — ?" began John.

"Spiders!" explained Humphrey briefly: "They eat each other!" John looked from one to the other.

"You seem to be rather exercised in your minds about it!" Gerald threw him an aside: "The whole point is it's a sexual experience!" and then he went on, to Humphrey: "You see it's exactly Shaw's conception of the Eternal Feminine — an absolute incarnation of it!" He waited. John perceived that there was a peculiar relation between the two in the argument. Gerald evidently expected Humphrey to be more impressed, more 'coming on' than he actually was. He seemed to keep running on ahead like a little dog and then having to come back again because Humphrey had not followed.

"Yes — quite!" said Humphrey at last.

"You find it over and over again!" went on Gerald excitedly. "Do you know Tolstoy's story of the voluptuary's dream?" Humphrey said nothing and made no movement to imply that he wanted to know it. But Gerald had too much momentum to be able to pull up: "He dreamt he was walking along a flat plain, when he saw two round white hills, and when he got to the hills, there was a deep black ravine in between them that opened and shut like a kind of mouth and tried to suck him into it."

"What a beastly dream!" exclaimed John.

Humphrey nodded to Gerald in a queer uneasy way. He had that uncomfortable feeling which everyone has, when ideas they once felt passionately but have since grown away from, are quoted in their presence with the obvious expectation of applause. His silence evidently took some of the wind out of Gerald's sails; but the latter was still unable to stop.

"Well I only say that it's bad enough in these crude forms — it's a beastly enough dream, as John says — but it's worse still in a civilized dress." John suddenly became very attentive, and Gerald proceeded: "You know perfectly well the sort of thing I mean — that horribly transparent change after marriage from vivacity to a sort of — a sort of cow-like placidity. For instance — well — I find Shakespeare's Rosalind absolutely disgusting nowadays — skipping and fluttering about the stage as though she's got a kind of itch and couldn't keep still — it's like fly-fishing. And you know perfectly well that as soon as her business is settled, she'll settle down into a placid, buxom matron with satisfaction beaming from every pore. But until then she's dangled about on the end of a string by a huge force she knows nothing about — you can see it! — every single thing she does or says, every tiniest movement she makes, she makes because she must, she herself simply has no say in the matter. I don't know if she's got any self: why you can positively see the wires. It fairly screeches at you — and I believe Shakespeare knew it as well as I do. The whole blessed business of romance and 'charm' and coquettishness and so forth — I don't care whether it's inspired half the art of the world or not — the whole of the

airs and graces and bowings and smirking and eighteenth-century elegance — I sometimes think the whole thing's nothing but a long — drawn-out version of the delighted shiverings and shakings of anticipation just before coition. And then the other — the placid matron business — corresponds to — when they've got going!"

John flushed a deep red and then turned rather pale, as he asked Gerald:

"What's the point of all this?"

"The point . . . ?" repeated Gerald, rather at a loss:

"I never heard you talk like this before!"

"No reason why I shouldn't talk like it now."

"Oh, all right!" said John, "only isn't there something rather unhealthy!"

"Unhealthy! I should think there is! That's just what I say!"

"Yes!" replied John quietly, "but I mean in your state of mind. These are — obsessions!"

"That's just the sort of thing I can't stand!" snapped out Gerald turning angry eyes on John. "People bring out some patent word like 'obsession' and think it explains everything, and now everything can be comfortably smoothed down and tucked in. Night-night! Supposing I have got an obsession, what am I to do about it, if I can't talk it out? Just shove it away in the dark and put weights on it, till I have a nervous breakdown, I suppose! Damn it, I never thought you were that kind of parson, John!" He paused, but both the others remained silent, with their eyes on the ground; until he went on:

"What hope is there for anything anywhere, if three fellows like us can't talk openly when we get together. Why, manalive, we must be able to talk openly! We shall die if we don't 'If way to a better there be, it exacts a full sight of the worst.' What can there possibly be objectionable, so long as we're all rock-bottom sincere — with no arrière-pensée about being dogs, or shocking people, or épater la bourgeoisie or any nonsense of that kind. And you know very well there's nothing of that about me or any of us!"

Once more he paused for a few moments, to see if they would say anything. They did not. He continued:

"I can't help it if ninety-nine people out of a hundred who talk like this do get a sort of prurient enjoyment out of it. You know I don't! My prurience doesn't come out that way, thank you! I sometimes wish it did!"

"There's no need to shout, old man!" murmured Humphrey, and Gerald suddenly turned on him:

"Thank you!" he said in a quieter but unpleasant voice: "As for you, I'm afraid I don't understand your position at all. You've drummed this sort of stuff into my ears often enough, and now, when I happen to get a bit worked up about it myself, you hush-hush me like a paternal schoolmaster. What's happened? Have you been converted or something? How little Clinker came to God!"

Humphrey answered by raising his eyebrows significantly and inclining his head one millimetre in the direction of John. And then suddenly Gerald collapsed, utterly ashamed of himself for having shown so much feeling.

"I'm sorry!" he said to John humbly. "I got heated — I thought you were accusing me of having a nasty mind!"

"No," said John: "I didn't mean that!"

"Of course not! I'm a silly fool."

"I only meant that perhaps there was something a little morbid — like a patient probing an irritating wound and making it worse!" Gerald looked at him, said nothing, and began to think.

"I think perhaps," said Humphrey: "Marston is confusing two separate things . . . But anyhow, Squire, I don't see why you should object to talking about this sort of thing!" ("I don't object!" groaned John) "Everybody's interested in it to-day, in one way or another. You yourself wouldn't be in the Church, if it wasn't for this revival of sacramentalism —"

"Sacramentalism!" exclaimed John. "What on earth has that got to do with what Gerald was talking about?" Humphrey was silent. He only raised his eyebrows and pointed at his belly.

"Well really!" said John, positively gasping: "And he has the cheek" he added, turning to Gerald, to accuse you of confusing two separate things!" Both of them, looking expectantly at Gerald, suddenly perceived that his eyes were wet. John glanced hurriedly at his watch and declared he must positively go and see what Margaret was doing. They were sure they would not change their minds and stay for supper? Humphrey shook his head firmly. They ought to have gone a quarter of an hour ago. "We'll finish the scrap another time, Squire!"

"Good-bye!" said John, holding out his hand to Gerald: "I'm awfully sorry I put things so clumsily!" Gerald shook his head with a smile: "Nonsense! — That's not bothering me. I'm fed up, but not about that!"

"Say good-bye to Margaret for us!" The front door clicked behind them.

CHAPTER XXXI

Margaret was in a playful mood. She had a piece of news for John, but was uncertain how and when to deliver it. She once thought of kissing him suddenly at some unexpected moment — while they were dressing perhaps — pinioning his arms to his sides, and springing it on him, with further kisses, unawares. And this half-formed intention gave an elusive mocking lightness to all her motions. But then she decided it would be better after all to keep it till after the service — especially as John was rather silent during supper, no doubt thinking of his approaching responsibilities. Moreover there was a certain luxury about retaining it a little longer as a private secret, looking at John's ridiculous innocent face and thinking how entirely unsuspecting he was.

She was dreaming in the pleasant, clean-washed interior of the church, while her senses gratefully absorbed all the harmless little pleasures provided for them, the sprinkling of golden candle-flames, the brilliant robes, and the starched white dresses of a band of little girls in the front pew. Dreamily, scarcely hearing the words, which the vicar ran over with great rapidity, she watched John upright in his stiff golden vestments going about his duties with a grave priest-like absorption upon his dark face. And gradually, as the service proceeded, she seemed to become caught up in a great swinging rhythm, as though all in the church were parts of one enormous, slow-swinging censer. She abandoned herself to it. She had not studied the service before-hand and had but a vague idea of its precise significance. But she

knew that in some sense or another the Holy Spirit was being invoked to fertilise the waters in the font and make them fruitful for blessing, and she felt an untold tranquillity and bliss stealing over her, as her thoughts passed from this divine mystery to the human one that was silently going forward within herself. And then, richly stirred in to all her feelings — so well stirred that not a drop but had some admixture of it — was the nearness of John and the merry pleasure which she anticipated in telling him — when? Perhaps during the walk home. Perhaps later.

John himself was anxious during the first part of the service; the ritual motions were complicated, and he was afraid of doing something in the wrong order and out of harmony with the words, which it was unfortunately difficult to hear. Towards the end, however, he too became caught up in that giant swinging rhythm — seemed indeed to become a mere member of some large mysterious living organism, of which his own muscular activity, no longer directed from his own will, was part of the automatic function. The climax of the whole service was the ceremonial dipping into the font of an enormous candle, as thick round as a man's body. Three times, under John's immediate supervision, it had to be raised and three times plunged down into the waters of the font, to make them holy. And while he was engaged in this — or the very reason that his consciousness was so fully bound up in the rhythm of the ceremony — another part of that consciousness suddenly bounded away, like a released spring, and stood aside, up, high up above the whole scene in the roof of the nave, looking on. At the same moment all the accidents of the occasion, the vestments and faces and personalities he knew so well, dropped away like shed garments, and the candle-lit scene stood forth to his imagination as a naked picture, a picture with a meaning, one single definite meaning, and no other. And when that moment had passed and had become a memory — but not till then — this meaning seemed to him to be hideously gross.

CHAPTER XXXII

She took his arm, as they came out, and, as they walked along, in dead silence, tried to devise ways and means of introducing the subject. It would have been easier, if only he would not walk quite so fast. At last she thought the service itself might be quite a good way of leading up to it. She broke the silence:

“A lovely service, Johnny-cake!”

“Did you think so?” He finished answering almost before the sound of her voice had died away. It was as if he had been waiting for her to say that very thing and getting ready to jump down her throat as soon as she did so. But she did not notice it, for she was thinking much more of what she wanted to say next than of what she had already said. The only question was, how to start again.

“Why?” she enquired at last: “Didn't you?”

“At first!”

Margaret glanced at him with a shock. Apparently he was angry with her about something. She would have to wait until he revealed what it was, and then try to make it right. And then she would be able to tell him. She made tea when they got in, and they both drank it in silence.

Meanwhile she looked at him and thought perhaps she should wait to ask him what he was annoyed about till they were in bed. After that she would tell him her news, still nestling up to him. It would be easier in the dark.

John suddenly got up from his chair and began walking out of the room.

"You'll be coming up soon?" she ventured timidly, just as he got to the door.

"I don't know" he replied, with his back to her: "I've got some work I must do — at least something I must think out!" Then he suddenly turned and burst out indignantly: "I must be able to get away and think by myself sometimes! There's no law that says we must always go to bed at exactly the same time!" Margaret felt as if she had been floored with a wooden blow on the back of her head. She stared at him in amazement; but all she said was:

"I didn't mean to suggest that there was!" And she added: "Incidentally we hardly ever do!"

"That's all right then!" He cleared his throat consciously and went out.

Alone in the study, he tried to grapple with the mounting blackness. Why should he find anything evil in this idea? He of all people, with whom it had always been a sort of pride and principle to deny that there was anything shameful in the bodily functions. Yes, but the point was that the people themselves, the congregation, did not know! Very well, then, so much the better! They were innocent. Yes, but what do you mean by 'innocent'? To be guided by your lower nature without knowing it — is that innocence? Ah! a horrible, cunning sort of getting at them unawares! Nonsense! Ignorance in these matters — in the imagination — is innocence. Yes, but I know now! Ah, yes, you are one of the great, sad, wise ones: you have to bear the burden of knowledge, while they rejoice and skip about like lambs in their innocent symbolism. This is as it always has been, always will be. The few know, the many simply are. He that increaseth knowledge — John Trinder = Atlas!

For a moment John was content; he had arrived at a solution, which not only satisfied his conscience, but also appealed to his self-esteem. And then suddenly the bottom was knocked out of it.

Priestcraft! So that was where it was leading him! But I am a priest! oh, not in that sense, not in that sense! Never! And suddenly he committed himself to a definite judgment: It is wrong, at any rate as far as I am concerned, it is wrong. They must be fully conscious. I at any rate won't give them symbols, unless I am satisfied that they know as much about the meaning of the symbols as I do!

He began to walk up and down the room. Who does know? he asked himself vaguely. Priests, monks, Jesuits . . . a string of mildly unpleasant terms, mostly suggestive of black objects, began to pass through his mind; he had a dim vision of a kind of class-room full of dark-faced, imperfectly shaven monks being lectured to by another dark-faced monk. A hideously oppressive sense of dark, wise, secret forces everywhere about him, invisible, groping, purposeful, made him feel miserable and helpless. And then he suddenly recollected the mood in which he had started on his career — looking anxiously about him for evil, because he was too happy! Of course it was just like his idiotic complacency to expect evil to come in some obvious melodramatic form, and then not to recognise it when it really came! It came, in the form of Miss Butler's tortuous egotism, and instead of uttering a loud war-cry and

dashing joyously into battle he moped about and got frightened! It came, in the form of this problem about ritual, and again he got frightened and angry. He, who in his first sermon had told his congregation that their Desire must be infinite, wanted to run away as soon as he caught a glimpse of desire in their eyes or a hint of its poetic gratification in their ceremony. Frightened and angry! Yes, angry. And angry with Margaret, of all people! With a dreadful pang he recalled her bewildered, timid, disappointed face, and, putting the light out, hurried upstairs to bed.

She was crying: quite noiselessly and without any motions of sobbing. It was the first time this had happened, and for a moment John felt as if someone had quietly stuck a stiletto into his back. He was also, although he did not excuse himself, bewildered at her having taken his manner so hard. He apologised abjectly, but she only shook her head, saying almost inaudibly: "It's not that!"

"What is it then?" She made no answer. John felt a sudden warm impulse to confide everything in her, all his consternation and depression — as he ought to have done at first, instead of letting it prey on his spirits and then snapping her head off by way of cheering himself up.

Two hours later, excruciated by his grotesque failure, he lay still, staring at the ceiling, while his mind revolved mechanically round and round the points of his reverie in the study, without coming to any conclusion. The only difference was that now those dark secret forces seemed to have taken one sharp seven-leagued stride nearer to himself. They were actually in the room. They stood between the two beds!

Margaret herself slept pretty well, and seemed in much better spirits next morning. Later in the day she came to him:

"Well," she said, with laughing eyes, "have you got over the nightmare?"

He saw at once that she was laughing because she had arranged to. He could not smile back at her. "Oh, don't look so solemn!" she suddenly cried out contemptuously, "Can't you laugh a bit?"

He only looked at her dumbly. There was silence. At last:—

"Are you losing your sense of humour?" she said sharply. He noticed how her chin stuck out.

"Not as far as I can tell myself!" he replied, again slowly, and filled with dismal forebodings. For he could see with transparent ease that all through this conversation she was not saying what she felt at all, but only what she had planned to say. She had privately decided on this method of 'dealing with' the situation, and was now carrying it out. Only she had not intended to get angry or impatient, or to give way to fear, or to let the bantering look die out of her eyes, as it was doing at this moment.

"John! You're not going to get a stupid obsession, are you?" He started at the word, remembering how only yesterday he had accused Gerald of the same thing. Every word he now uttered seemed to hurt him:

"I'm sorry! I can't see it in that light myself . . . I don't think you quite understand!"

"But I do understand. I told you!"

"Yes: you understand what I meant; but not what I feel about it." She gave up all attempt at laughing it off. With dismal inevitability the argument came back to

that wretched, threadbare subject of 'meaning' in pictures. She grew more and more angry, trying all the time to conceal the fact. She said she always knew his complicated theories would lead to trouble.

"You talk about only seeing in things 'what you bring to them yourself'. I suppose that's all you are going to see in future — your own little personal fads and fancies reflected everywhere! And now you're getting obsessed! If you'd think a little less of yourself, you might see something pleasanter!"

There was no reply to this but silence. John turned and began slowly walking away, when a noise behind him made him look round. Margaret had broken down. Her whole body was shaking with sobs.

"Margaret!" For a while she went on crying in silence; and then:

"I had s-something I w-w-wanted to tell you!" she gasped out: "but I don't suppose you'll b-be particularly interested!" He was even more frightened than he was surprised at this sudden lapse into a moody femininity, which was so foreign to her normal behaviour.

"What is it?" he asked gently.

"Y-y-y-ou're only interested in yourself now!"

"What is it, Margaret?" he asked again, taking her by the hand. She only tried to push him away. And then, suddenly, for no reason, his fear turned into panic. He gripped her hand tight.

"What is it?" he repeated. "I insist on your telling me at once!" Shaking with sobs, and still half resentfully she told him what she had been wanting to tell him for twenty-four hours. Fear, anger, oppression, everything vanished from him. He melted into a blaze of tenderness and caught her in his arms. At first she refused to yield herself, so that he held her stiff, and averted, in his embrace. But then suddenly her mood changed, and she buried her face in the lapel of his coat. She was terribly upset and seemed unable to calm herself.

"When did you know, Margaret?" he asked her at length.

"Yesterday!"

"Yesterday!" Thinking it all over later in the day, John could not, in spite of his pleasure, escape the shadow of an awful sadness. The pity of it! The sheer bad luck — that all this telling of the news should have happened just as it had done — for her — all in this muddled, unlovely way! He began running through last night's conversation in his mind and had to stop, because in the light of her subsequent revelations he simply could not bear to go on. And indeed years afterwards there still rang in his ears one bewildered question of hers, floating lonely out to him across the darkness of the bedroom, as it had done during the night, but painful with all the absurd, awful painfulness of the following day's recollection: "But John, what is it that you find so ugly?"

That night John slept early and fast, worn out by the previous night's wakefulness and the emotional strain of the day. But Margaret lay awake for three-quarters of the night, and when at last she fell asleep, dreamed an unpleasant dream. She was bathing somewhere with John in very blue and sunny waters — perhaps the Mediterranean. Far beneath them they could see the golden glimmer of a fine sandy floor, while glittering goldfish swam to and fro in the crystal waves. All of a sudden she realised that John was no longer with her. She looked round in

terror, but saw nothing anywhere save only sea and sky. Thinking he must be drowning, she dived and swam down, until after what seemed like ages she came to the bottom, and struggled about, wading with difficulty through the thickness of the water, to look for him. No sign! She was absolutely alone. And she was about to give up the search with a muffled cry of despair, when she saw a kind of cleft in the bottom of the sea. She began looking at this cleft, and, as she looked, there slowly emerged from its blackness a horrible deep-sea creature with nothing but a soft face and a writhing tangle of green tentacles. It floated slowly towards her in the crushing silence of those depths and then, as she stood watching it, rooted in horrible fascination, it suddenly discharged a dense cloud of some inky fluid.

Margaret woke just as the cloud was about to touch her. She was exhausted and slightly feverish, and John persuaded her to stay in bed all that day.

In the afternoon Janet called. She had come to say Goodbye, for she was leaving next morning for the south of Italy with Mr. Dodge, as one of his private secretaries. She came up and sat in Margaret's room, and told her all about the route they were travelling, and asked her advice. Margaret became interested, but after a time they left the subject, and Janet asked her how they were getting on. Well, replied Margaret, except that John was a little upset about 'something connected with his work'. At once Janet recollected the washed-out white face with which her brother had greeted her. She said nothing but, continuing to reflect, glanced quickly at her sister-in-law and began to wonder if her being in bed had anything to do with this 'upset'. All of a sudden she felt terribly sorry for them both — two helpless, pathetic little creatures caught in the toils of an alien, hostile world, like babes in the wood; and this feeling altered the whole look on her face as she bent down to kiss Margaret before going downstairs. Almost involuntarily the latter took the opportunity to confide in her — a thing which she had not intended to do at all. Janet's face broke into dimples and creases of pleasure. She upbraided herself for running away, almost as if she had known. "But I may be back by then!" she added. And quickly she went on to ask Margaret if she were hoping for a boy or a girl. Margaret half laughed.

"My dear Janet," she said, "I'm so dithered, I really can't quite say what I want! Before it happened I wanted a boy, but now honestly I think I would rather it was a girl. Perhaps she might be a little easier to understand!"

There was silence. Janet, who was troubled by the faintest ping of bitterness both in the laughter and in the last words, did not know what to say. She fell into a kind of brief reverie and at last, emerging from it, said slowly, and with an extraordinary sadness in her voice that seemed somehow out of harmony with her words:

"I've almost come to the conclusion that it you want a thing very badly . . . — you get it!"

Margaret made no reply. Janet again said good-bye and was told to go and find John and take him out for a walk.

He consented readily, glad to get out into the air. John was in that hypersensitive, yet at the same time half detached condition, which sometimes comes as the result of fatigue and sleeplessness, when everything is very clear, very distant, very delicate. At no time is the touch of the fresh air on the skin more

delicious; and the spirit seems striving out of mouth and eyes to meet it, as though half anticipating that completer liberation from the body which sleep must shortly bring. Absorbed, and hardly conscious of their surroundings, they took their way together down roads of new and half-built red-brick houses. Both were aware of the soft air, the clear spring light, and the pale blue sky over their heads, as well as of the profusion of eager sticky buds on an occasional chestnut tree, which they passed. Yet though they were both enjoying these things, and though they were sharing the enjoyment with one another, they did not speak of them. They spoke very little. Occasionally at long intervals one of them dropped a remark into the silence, as a man who sits musing by a pond may from time to time fling lazily a pebble into its melancholy stillness.

Janet asked him if he were having difficulties with his work.

He murmured rather diffidently something of his disappointment at not getting into closer touch with people. And after they had taken some twenty more paces in silence, she said:

“Yes, that’s the only thing that matters.”

Later, she began to speak tentatively of Margaret, saying he must keep in touch with her at all costs. And it was at this point that John felt for the first time the terrible weight of sadness that filled out the tones of her voice, seeming to whisper to him from far beyond them, like the low moaning of a distant sea. She seemed to suggest the things rather than say them — that a young wife’s position must be horribly lonely — that everything — even her character, might depend on the husband — that we ought never to consider our own happiness — a copy-book maxim, which she was vaguely surprised to hear falling from her own lips. But then, in the last six months, so many surprising things had happened! On his side he found nothing annoying in her presuming to advise him. On the contrary, it was wonderfully soothing. He stole a look at her and suddenly realised with astonishment how no previous walk with Janet had ever in the remotest degree resembled this one. She appeared to understand everything. And as they walked on, again in silence, it began to seem to him that there were not two now, but three of them walking — himself, Janet — and the Silence.

Just before they reached home, however, they spoke a little more continuously of Humphrey and his adventures. John began to describe their visit of the day before yesterday, and as soon as he mentioned Gerald, and that he had been angry and distressed, Janet changed, stiffening (though he did not observe it) into a walking statue of greedy attention. She at once asked him to tell her what the distress was about. After a floundering attempt, he said he was sorry but could not explain; and immediately guessed — from the very flavour of the silence — that she had somehow understood practically everything without his needing to tell her. Gradually she relaxed and became thoughtful again. And then his surmise was confirmed; for a few hundred yards before they reached home, after another long interval of pacing on together in silence, she said very slowly and thoughtfully, looking at the ground, as she spoke:

“It seems to me, we are all busy working p-oisons out of our systems!”

John made no reply. They walked on. But during the next few months his mind recurred over and over again to those words of hers, marvelling at the depth

of wisdom and penetration from which they appeared to spring. They turned in at the front gate. It was as if the last deliberate pebble had been flung into that fathomless pool of holily intimate silence, and their two souls were sitting hand in hand, watching the ripples die gently away.

Ten minutes later Janet was hurrying down the road, while he waved to her from the front door step. Then he went slowly indoors, pondering over her difficult nature — and over the strange happiness which in spite of everything glowed through him, as he recalled that curious, silent walk.

END OF PART II