

PART IV

CHAPTER LII

The next morning found Margaret busy with preparations for the garden-party. Gerald began the day by trying to get her to come for a walk with him and, when that failed, he asked her to play to him on the piano. But she always seemed to have some little job that needed attending to, the arranging of tables and chairs, the setting out of flowers, or the cooking of some festive delicacy, and she refused him apologetically every time. At last he made up his mind to accept the situation and, after solemnly rebuking her for making this pretentious display of domestic virtue, put himself at her disposal.

She made use of him, sent him on various errands, and often called him from another room before he had finished the last thing she had put him to. This working for her and being at her beck and call somehow gave Gerald more pleasure than any casual stroll could have done. In the first place it appealed to that instinct for domesticity, which he had always possessed, and which had been stirred so pleasantly by his first visit to the Trinders after their wedding. But there was something deeper than this. Once or twice he found himself anxiously listening for her voice, deliberately delaying to go, in order that she might call him. He wanted her to order him about. The delicious sense of being, in the ancient courtly meaning of the term, her 'servant' touched strange chords in him, whose existence he had well-nigh forgotten, took him back in eye-opening glimpses to that unearthly enthusiasm of shyest devotion, that impulse to self-abasement before the fair, which had often bathed his heart so suddenly and in such high, warm, bewildering waves, when he was still the adoring schoolboy.

It was his last day at Klosters, and a voice spoke in him, saying: it is good! Accordingly he surrendered himself to these feelings entirely. And strange it was, that, in so surrendering himself, he became aware that Janet also knew of such feelings, and knew them better than himself. Something in her whole look and carriage, as he recollected it from their last meeting, told him so. And from that moment she began to be present in his consciousness in a strange dominant way, even when he was not thinking of her.

These sudden peeps, or apparent peeps, into the hearts of his friends, and the subsequent sensation of remaining peculiarly near them, coloured the whole of Gerald's visit to Klosters. In the train, it had been John; now it was Janet; and others were to follow. The experience was new to him; it reminded him — as indeed the subtlest and most elusive of his experiences now often did — of something he had read in Brockmann's book. But, above all, it enlarged his heart to a tenderness and sensibility, of which he became almost afraid. Hitherto these glimpses into other people's souls had brought with them a marked sensation of superiority, as though he had said to himself: 'I can see through you all right!' Now it was different. Though he seemed to have looked for a moment through the very eyes of the other, yet he felt after it nothing but humility, nothing but a powerfully enhanced sense of the infinite possibilities dormant in that other, and of his own limitations and responsibilities.

The garden-party did not turn out quite such a magnificent affair as Gerald had imagined. By means of it Lady Hudson was working off at one blow various social obligations to the neighbouring families. The local member, (an Agriculturalist, of course) fresh from the contest, as to the results of which there had never in this constituency been the shadow of a doubt, was there with his wife, while an old school-friend of Margaret's, who lived not far off, a little group of Sir Otto's friends (some of whom were to stay on over the week-end) and the Killigrew family, on holiday somewhere in the neighbourhood, made up the party. The latter turned up en masse, including the journalist husband of one of the daughters who had married since her last appearance at Klosters for Margaret's wedding. This man had travelled down from town especially for the occasion, and he was returning the same night.

Passing through London after a short visit to Dusseldorf, Sir Otto had returned to Klosters during the morning, bringing with him Professor Curbiton, who was to stay two or three days, Moulton, the theatrical manager, and the novelist, whose book about China he had once recommended Middleton to read. The latter was a stout Jewish-looking individual, obviously receptive of impressions but not a good talker.

Margaret was rather disappointed by a slight wind, which arose about noon, bringing some cloud with it, and was cold enough to take the edge off the pleasure of her guests. About four o'clock in the afternoon, however, when tea had been served and everyone was standing about on the big lawn chattering politely over his cup and saucer, her spirits began to rise. For one thing she felt that her responsibilities were at an end. The party was going well, and it would continue to go now of its own momentum. For a few moments, with nothing to calculate or provide, she even felt quite at a loss but then, looking round at the whole smoothly-running affair, which her detachment now enabled her to do for the first time, and recollecting at the same instant at the back of her mind both the reassuring letter which she had received that morning from John and her own strengthened determination to make things right between them, she was lifted on a little wave of elation. A movement under an Azalea bush on her left made her look down; and she immediately perceived Merlin, who had established himself there on the grass and was following intently with his head and eyes the movements of the trousers and skirts of the human beings who passed near. He had put on a sort of fierce, darting look, as if he suspected that the whole garden-party was really an elaborate scheme for stalking him and leading him away into some horrible captivity. She watched him delightedly for a moment and then stooped down and whispered:

"Merlin! Hullo, Merlin!"

in a confidential voice, to which he responded by immediately abandoning the qui vive and rolling, as usual, ecstatically about on his back, keeping his amber eyes all the time steadily fixed on hers. She walked a little way away and from a distance watched him continue rolling himself for some time until, discovering her absence, he gradually resumed the tense, important watchfulness of before.

It was a habit of Merlin's to select a little observation-post of this kind whenever he got the chance. A piece of torn brown paper, some straw thrown out of a packing-case, or a few cut branches from the shrubbery, lying on the ground —

any one of these was irresistible to him. He would creep stealthily into the midst and from there, in the fond illusion that he could see without being seen, observe the outer world, following every tiniest movement in it with the conscious precision of a young staff-officer watching manoeuvres through a brand-new pair of field-glasses.

There was a sort of understanding between Margaret and her stepmother on this matter. They always referred to the observation-post as a 'bower.'

"Look! Merlin's got a bower!" one of them would say to the other, and they would stand together and watch him being fearfully stealthy and clever for a few moments before they went on with whatever they were doing. Margaret in particular loved him in this furtive, whisking mood which was really, she felt convinced, all put on as a kind of privy game. And as she watched him this afternoon, she abandoned herself also to a certain irresponsible butterfly mood which came upon her only at the rarest intervals during her life. She entered Merlin's world. Considered as persons, the guests at that party ceased to exist, becoming for her, too, simply large boots and shoes, which shuffled suspiciously over the grass in different directions.

Sst! That way — look! now that way! There they go! sst! All gone! . . . Ha! . . . Safe! Until returning to herself, she observed that nothing more exciting had occurred than the passing by of Professor Curbiton and the youngest Miss Killigrew engaged in conversation.

All of a sudden she heard the thin plaintive scrape of a fiddle floating up from the lower lawn behind the beeches. She had forgotten the country-dancers! Hurrying down to the other lawn, Margaret found Gerald there, already efficiently marshalling the dancers in a clear space between the trees and asking if they were ready to begin. The neighbouring market-town possessed a Morris side, and after a few country-dances had been disposed of, six men in white shirts and trousers, came on with their bells and handkerchiefs and began one of the dances in the local tradition. Gerald, who had never seen the Morris before, was immediately spell-bound. The plaintive little melody from the fiddle, set against the angular childlike springings and hoppings of the male dancers, seemed to produce such a blend of humour and pathos with a rare elusive kind of spiritual grace, as made him feel that he had peeped for an instant right into the open heart of England. In the pause after the dance he went up with a warm impulse of gratitude to thank the somewhat lugubrious individual who appeared to lead the team. They got into conversation and Gerald discovered that the side consisted largely of young men from the University who had volunteered to make up the party.

"Don't the natives do it?" asked Gerald disappointedly, "I thought I had heard somewhere that the tradition in —" (the town they had come from) "had remained unbroken right down to to-day." The lugubrious expert smiled — a little grimly, as Gerald thought.

"It would have done," he said, "if we hadn't taken care to break it. I came down here ten years ago and found them doing it all wrong! They had no more idea of a Hey, for instance, than my motor-bicycle."

"I see," said Gerald doubtfully, "the local people don't dance with you, then? But you got the dances from the country people themselves, didn't you?"

“Oh, we’re always having that thrown at our heads,” said the other. “We tried to get them to come in. We actually gave the oldest member of the team here free attendance at our classes for as long as he liked — but it was no good.”

“Didn’t he come?”

“Oh yes, he came for a bit. But he couldn’t do it! He never got higher than Grade 3.”

“Really, and how many ‘grades’ are there?”

“Twenty-five!”

“My God!” exclaimed Gerald “— that is, I mean, how well organised you must have got the whole thing!” And he made his escape as soon as possible.

As soon as the dances were over, he sought out Margaret again, in order to repeat to her a slightly doctored version of his conversation with the mournful and dogmatic dancer, which, he felt sure, would appeal to her sense of humour. To his surprise, however, Margaret simply would not listen to any disparaging remarks, and indeed warmly championed the whole movement. If there was a heavy-handed and pedantic note, if here and there they behaved foolishly, still, without that movement, in a few years more everything would have been lost. She thought it impossible to exaggerate the debt we owed it, and Gerald, remembering the Morris dance, was inclined to agree with her, besides feeling a little bit ashamed of his own bumptiousness.

They were back now on the big lawn, talking together rather apart from the others. The subject was soon disposed of, and afterwards they stood silent, reflecting on what had been said. Then Margaret began to notice that Nestor was behaving in an extremely odd manner. For some reason or other he would keep barking at them. She watched him. He was dividing his time between herself and Gerald, and a big group of guests in the middle of the lawn. Two or three times he ran right round behind the guests, came back again to where they were, put his head down, and made little runs at them, as though he would have liked to snap at their heels. Without saying anything, she pointed out his movements to Gerald, and the two stood looking on with curiosity, to see what he was after. Suddenly the light broke on Gerald. He pointed, with speechless delight, first to themselves and then to the group of jabbering guests, now crowded together more closely than ever, precisely in the middle of the great lawn. And then Margaret saw. Poor Nestor had reverted to type. He was trying with all his might to get the two obstinate stray sheep to join the main flock in the middle of the field! The two looked at each other again.

Margaret patted and spoke to Nestor, who whereupon gave up trying to drive them back and confined his attention entirely to the main herd. They watched him industriously panting round and round, always crowding the sublimely unconscious guests a little nearer to one another. And they waited to see what would happen.

“I do believe,” said Gerald, “he’s got every single person in except us.” He giggled. He was now enjoying himself intensely. The sharing with her of this glorious joke seemed somehow to reinstate him in her good graces after the little difference of opinion.

“No!” replied Margaret, “Father isn’t there. Look!” And she pointed to a large apple-tree on the right-hand edge of the lawn, beneath which Sir Otto stood with

Merlin under his arm, placidly surveying the whole scene. Just as Gerald turned his head, however, the cat began struggling in his master's grasp, dropped to the ground, and walking across to them in a dignified manner, commenced rolling operations on one of Gerald's shoes.

"How odd!" said Margaret. "He did that to Humphrey the only time he was here — so Sukie said — and he's never done it to John once!" Gerald picked the cat up.

"Ah! Merlin knows a thing or two!" he said jestingly. "He thinks the whole party is an elaborate apparatus for stalking him. Have you noticed him? He's been thoroughly on his guard the whole afternoon. In fact —" he waved his hand towards the herd — "you and I and Merlin — are something rather special, I fancy!"

Curiously enough Margaret felt a faint resentment, when she discovered that Gerald had penetrated the secret of her being able to regard the party from Merlin's point of view. It was as if he had gone too far. Not that there was anything especially sacred about her understanding of Merlin — it was only very very private. Why must he try and nose his way in? She made no answer. All this took place in the course of a very few moments. It could only be a very few more until the lamblike visitors awoke to what was going on, a situation which, Gerald confidently expected, would prove the funniest of all. He was disappointed accordingly, when just as the crowding seemed to have reached a (for the occasion) intolerable density, so that the few guest who had teacups left in their hands, were practically unable to lift them to their lips, Sir Otto walked across the lawn and woke up the group by suggesting a game of croquet.

"Nestor!" he said, as he passed by the dog, "go to bed, you old sinner!"

"What a pity!" said Gerald, turning with a sigh to Margaret. "I should so have liked to see them wake up to what was going on." But her attention had already gone. She only agreed absently, and a minute later left him. Gerald felt a little pang of loneliness as he saw her go off to another part of the garden engaged in animated conversation with an old school friend. He stood alone, idly watching Merlin who, having become accustomed to the presence of so many people, was wandering sleekly about the lawn. And, as he watched, he gradually became conscious that this was the first time Margaret had ever caused him such a pang. What was it? He only knew that there was an inglorious something about it quite different from anything he had felt during the morning or any of the preceding days. But jealousy — that was a preposterous word!

Gradually he became interested once more in Merlin. There was no denying it — he was somehow different from other cats. The very way he carried his head — that huge round moon of a head — was different. He moved like music, he seemed to possess the eternal grace of his kind without its vindictiveness. And of course Merlin chose that precise moment to sit down and start a prosaic, systematic washing! Gerald laughed. Merlin abandoned his ablutions and stretched himself couchant on the grass, where he lay magnificently at ease, waving his long tail indolently to and fro. Something about him reminded Gerald of the lions in Trafalgar Square. And suddenly Gerald became absolutely fascinated, forgetful of everything, as for a moment his mind went back to the Morris dance. It was no longer an animal he was looking at at all, but a mysterious, moving image of — of — had it stooped to him

again, twice in the same afternoon — the same inexpressibly touching vision? The stupidity — and the grace! Ariel . . . Bottom . . . Tears rose to the brink of Gerald's eyes, as for a moment he beheld, whole and incarnate in his imagination, that shadowy Figure, which he knew, however thickly it might be overlaid with the corpulent philistinism of one generation or the sexual fiddle-faddle of another, to be the core and living spirit of England.

CHAPTER LIII

At dinner that night, Gerald contrived, with some difficulty, to sit opposite to Margaret. He wanted on this last occasion to be where he could see, even more than where he could talk to, her. The conversation at table was of the kind that is inevitable wherever a group of educated English people are gathered together. All subjects had to be treated in a sardonic vein, the speaker at the same time subtly hinting that he had really probed pretty deep — he could do if he would, etc.! Only at one moment during the meal did the general desire for effect give way for a few moments to a general desire for information, and that was when somebody asked the novelist a question about the religion of China. Having had much practice in putting things in a popular form, this gentleman was able to give some interesting facts about the practice of ancestor-worship. As soon as he had finished, the remaining Miss Killigrew, who was just eagerly picking up the conversation-game, said:

“Ancestor-worship always seems to me to be such a sensible religion! It was a perfectly brilliant idea, whoever thought of getting people to honour their relations — after they are dead!”

Professor Curbiton chuckled.

“What better moment to choose, eh, Miss Killigrew?” he said; and he added: “Seriously, from a physiological point of view, I should think it's probably one of the few commandments that can quite safely be obeyed.”

“It is certainly obeyed,” said the novelist, and he turned to Curbiton. “Quite seriously,” he said, “it seems to me, with certain modifications, to stand a very good chance of becoming the religion of the future.”

“Why?” said Gerald.

“Well — Miss Killigrew is quite right. It's so sensible. Of course, from our point of view I was thinking more of cultural ‘ancestors’ — every nation honouring its own great men and so forth. There's so much less to be got rid of than there is from any other religion I know of — all the paraphernalia of devils and miracles and heaven and hell and so on never seems to have taken a firm hold there. In fact I believe the anthropologists have not been able to find any totemic origins at all.” The conversation passed lightly to the subject of superstition in general and from there to a ‘spook’ play that was running at the moment in London about a man who ‘got out of time’ in some remarkable way, and found himself back in the past, living a part of his life over again, with an exact knowledge of what was coming. After a certain amount of sparkle on this subject, a respectful appeal was made to Curbiton. Was there any physiological justification for the possibility of such experiences?

“There’s no reason,” he replied, “why we shouldn’t eventually be able to make a definite part of a man’s past life more real to him than the present. It would simply be a question of finding the right piece of brain — and stimulating it. The same sort of thing is being done already in certain brain diseases. As a matter of fact Holzenkopf has been doing some interesting experiments quite recently on localisation of the brain-centres. He managed to produce a dog that could only bite — couldn’t even eat — because Holzenkopf had taken out every bit of its brain but the biting bit. It lived nearly four hours after the operation, too.”

“It must have had a very thin time during that four hours,” said Moulton, “biting away and never eating anything.”

“I hope it bit Mr. Holzenkopf,” said Lady Hudson.

“It did!” said Curbiton. “That’s just what he’s so proud of — says it proves it had to bite. Otherwise it would never have bitten him. Dogs very rarely do. They think you’re doing it all for their good.

“To return to the original question,” said the novelist after a slight pause, “what about the remote past — before the individual was born, I mean? Do you think that will ever be tapped? I don’t see why it shouldn’t be all stored up somewhere; we know there’s nothing outside heredity. And we hear some pretty curious things already about ‘racial memory’ and so forth. That’s partly the way they look at their ancestors out there, as channels, so to speak, through which they can get access to the past as a whole.” Curbiton shrugged his shoulders and disclaimed any opinion on the subject.

Neither Gerald nor Margaret had taken much part in this conversation. As to the former, the depression which he felt over his approaching departure had made him even less inclined to contribute his quota of flippancy than he might otherwise have been. And now, as he leaned back in his chair and let the incessant ripple of words flow over him, he experienced a curious conviction. Never before had he appreciated with such intensity the reality of his own distinction between ‘awake’ and ‘asleep’, human beings. The uninterrupted current of discourse seemed indeed to possess the same soporific virtue as the roar of a millstream or a weir. He looked round the table at the ring of alternately crepitating and cachinnating masks. He could almost hear — behind them — the snores. And at the same instant he seemed in a flash to comprehend Humphrey, as he had never comprehended him before, and after the fashion in which he had recently “re-understood” John and Janet. A certain superfluous fierceness, which he had often detected in Humphrey’s attitude towards various current ideas and mannerisms, stood before him for the first time in a perfectly clear light and, as long as it did so, he was not with the people who sat beside him, but with Humphrey himself. It had suddenly become so absolutely obvious to him that the best possible thing, indeed the only thing of any importance at all, was that this ripple should stop! “Wup!” he thought to himself half-wonderingly, “all cars stop here!” and his lips could not forbear curving into a soft and secret smile at the memory of Humphrey’s animation that night in front of Dawson and Rollo. “I shall be seeing him to-morrow!” he thought, and at once felt something inspired against the emptiness he had been fearing.

By now the ladies had retired to the drawing-room, and the little group of men, deprived of their vivacity, had grown quieter over the port and sherry.

Moulton, Killigrew, and Curbiton had their heads together over some mildly topical subject, so Gerald moved up nearer to Sir Otto and began to speak to him about Klosters. It was a subject on which his host could talk interestingly. Gerald, who recollected hearing from John how the old monastery on the site had been abolished on account of evil practices, was surprised now to hear that it had been famous originally for the piety and wisdom of its inmates.

"In fact," said Sir Otto, "some authorities hold that the accusation brought against the monks were simply malicious inventions."

"And what is your own idea, Sir?"

"A little of both. You can read it up if you like," (and he mentioned a book in the library which contained information on the subject.) "Two or three of the monks were actually tried in Consistory, you know. There was supposed to be a heretical tendency — Manicheanism in some form or another, as usual. The charges of sorcery do look rather like malice — or of course it may have been just local superstition. On the other hand . . . the other charges . . . it's quite clear the two things have often gone together. People try to get to heaven too quickly, Marston, and find themselves plump in the other place as a result!" Gerald shuddered a little.

Not long after this they joined the ladies in the other room. Curbiton entered the room a few minutes after the rest and, looking round, perceived that the only comfortable chair left was occupied by Merlin — warm, circular, and unconscious. He went up to the big grey cat and put his hand carelessly to the scruff of its neck to lift it on to the ground. But Merlin, recalled all too suddenly to the perils of the conscious state, sprang to his feet with a galvanic jerk and, after allowing his excellent teeth to meet through a segment of Curbiton's finger, ran quickly out of the room. The professor, with a rapid "Blast you!" snatched his hand to his mouth and began sucking it, while both Margaret and Lady Hudson apologized profusely.

"I've never known Merlin do that before, Professor Curbiton! He's such a placid philosophical sort of cat. Maggie always says he knows everything." Curbiton had long ago recovered himself.

"It's nothing!" he assured them, and seated himself victoriously on the empty chair, he pooh-poohed the idea that such a little wound required any dressing. Then, as the commotion subsided, Gerald heard him say in a low voice to Moulton, who was sitting next to him, "I think that cat must have known what I've been doing to his poor brother." He looked quickly at Margaret, and caught the faintest, scarcely perceptible wince.

Gerald was unable to sleep that night. Images of pain and terror, drawn partly from history, and partly from numerous war-books which he had read, thronged his imagination, jostling uneasily against the growing admiration for his friend's wife, which would not let him rest. He felt utterly lonely and forsaken, and at last, switching the light on, perceived that he had no book beside him with which to drive away the oppressiveness of the dark. After a further fruitless attempt to sleep, therefore, he resolved to go down to the library and hunt up the book about which Sir Otto had told him.

What troubled him most was the fear lest his nocturnal footsteps creaking through the house should alarm somebody else and induce them to investigate. He had no wish at all to be startled by a sudden voice out of the dark or the cautious

shuffle of approaching feet. Having, with a considerable sense of relief, at last switched the light on in the library, he found the book which Sir Otto had mentioned and was returning to the door to switch it off again, when his eye was caught by two large volumes in a shelf near the ground level behind a writing-table.

New volumes, identical in size and shape, they still had their transparent paper wrappers on, and, stooping down, he proceeded to read through one of these covers of them the words "Imperial Encyclopedia — Aamei — Bunk." These then must be the first two volumes of the new Encyclopedia! Gerald suddenly felt a strong desire to look at the article on Carlyle, which had been substituted for his own. He took the volume from the shelf and carried it to a table.

Before opening it, he glanced at the window. A large leather screen stood across the bay, and he now remembered for the first time that, owing to the alteration that was being made in the curtain-rods, this was its only covering. The light flooding through the upper part of the window, then, would be visible from the road! He became afflicted with a kind of panic, lest a policeman or some person outside might see it and suspect burglary. It was only one-o'clock. Somebody in the village might very well be awake! Somebody might even startle him out of his wits by tapping on the window! Then he would look and see a dim, ghostly face peering through! Ugh! He tiptoed gently over to the door and switched off the light. Then he carried his tome right into the bay behind the screen where, in the brilliant moonlight, he would be able to glance at the article before returning to bed.

He turned up the heading 'Carlyle' and was soon skimming rapidly through the twenty odd columns which the writer of the article had been allowed. There was a lengthy biography, then a vivid description of Carlyle's relations with his wife, and the rest of the article was devoted to a general consideration of his literary style, into which the writer had contrived to insert some account of the different works, and of the influences and 'reactions' which had led to them. This last section was treated as a kind of tragedy, Carlyle being depicted as having fallen more and more hopelessly under the spell of German culture and German transcendental philosophy, as his life proceeded, while his style grew steadily more inelegant and incomprehensible as the result. The author made no attempt to characterise the ideas which had aroused his enthusiasm, except by the liberal use of epithets such as 'misty', 'melancholy', 'nebulous' and above all 'turgid.' Gerald began at last to count the number of times this word 'turgid' occurred. Otherwise the article was well-written. Above all was it crystal-clear. You were made to feel that the writer of it sat in the blazing sun on a high pinnacle, whence he could watch with amused tolerance the groping and unnecessarily metaphysical self-deceptions of poor unhappy little Carlyle and his beloved Germans.

In spite of his disgust, the thing held Gerald's attention. He was always making up his mind to put it back in the shelf and return to bed — and he was always starting just one more paragraph. All of a sudden — and just as he had reached the last page — he heard the unmistakable sound of steps outside the library door. Rigid for a moment with alarm, he remained bent over his book, absolutely motionless, while the door was opened. The light was switched on. And then to his immense relief he heard Sir Otto's voice.

"I thought it would be better to leave it here," he was saying, "in the same drawer."

"That is all right, Otto," replied another voice, unknown to Gerald, "just let me look at it!" There was the sound of a drawer being unlocked.

"Hm!" said the strange voice after an interval, "it's good; but I'm not sure it's good enough. Smiler can do much better than that. It ought to be simpler."

"Would you like it altered in some way?" asked Sir Otto.

"Oh no! you couldn't alter that without destroying all the force it has got. I shall have to think out another cartoon altogether. We'll have this one first, and then mine."

"Very well . . . but you know the same director can only choose once in the same month."

"Oh, that's nonsense!" replied the unknown voice impatiently. "Let me see a list of directors. I know at least four of them are admitted besides yourself." Gerald heard the drawer being closed again — and locked. Now was the time to do what he ought to have done at once — reveal himself. And he was just about to do so, when he was arrested once more by the sound of Sir Otto's voice:

"Now as to headlines," it began, "I can —" whereupon it was immediately cut short by the other voice, which answered with the same authoritative impatience as before.

"It's no use talking headlines and slogans in this situation. It has gone too far. I notice you still want some practice, Otto, in distinguishing these matters; you will have to go on coming to me for the Imaginations for some time yet. Here one needs very special discrimination. Even the cartoons are useless unless they are the right shape. They have to work right down into the Threptike. And then they stay."

There was a pause. Gerald tried once more to get up courage to walk out from behind his screen. But the longer he left it the more atrociously difficult did it seem to have become. Sir Otto spoke again.

"Yes," he said hesitatingly, "I think I understand you — only then I don't quite see why we are still to go on investing and advertising in Home Truths."

"Ah, that is a different activity and looks much further ahead. It touches a different class of mind altogether. I thought I explained once why the anti-German impulse is always worth watering!"

"Well, but — the Treaty!" The unknown voice laughed:

"Oh, Otto, I sometimes think you know absolutely nothing. Worth watering, if it has got real cultural roots, I mean. And that is exactly what the Treaty was for — so that we should be openly accused of being pro. There's no journal that is putting that accusation more clearly than Home Truths, as you know. I was looking at it again only last week. It certainly must not die."

Gerald could bear it no longer. His agitation was so great that, although he took in every word they spoke and could remember most of them afterwards, he was quite unable at the time to attend to their meaning. He dreaded horribly to reveal himself, but he dreaded still more to make the situation worse by delaying. It was despair rather than any courage or resolution, which drove him at this point to walk out from the screen, saying in a loud voice as he did so:

“Please don’t be alarmed! I — I think I must have gone to sleep!” For some moments there was a dead silence. Gerald perceived at once that Sir Otto was startled and confused. The other speaker was an old man with fine white hair and a curiously large head, whom Gerald had never seen before. He gazed at Gerald perfectly calmly; and it struck the latter that he would have behaved in very much the same way, had he known that he was there all the time. This added considerably to Gerald’s discomfiture. He had rarely, if ever, felt quite so small as he did at that moment, standing in his striped pyjamas and bare feet before the two dignified, fully dressed older men. He proceeded to explain, without waiting to be asked, the purpose of his visit to the library and, so guilty did he feel, that he was almost as much surprised as pleased to find his own stammering story corroborated by the book in his hand. At last, reiterating the surmise that he must have fallen asleep, he relapsed into silence, and waited for them to make some comment. Neither of them said anything.

At length, however, Sir Otto, who had recovered himself immediately after his first start, asked him if he would take some whisky before going back to bed. Gerald shook his head and, murmuring incoherently something about being afraid of the cold, fled only too thankfully through the door and up to his room. Only when he got there, did it strike him that the old man had not uttered a single word — not even good night — and at the same time he began to recollect with the utmost discomfort a certain expression, a kind of ferocious and questioning intensity, which had gleamed for an instant out of the depths and the calmness of those mild blue eyes, as he had lied to them about having been asleep.

“Who was it?” asked the old man, as soon as Gerald had left the room. Sir Otto explained.

“What do we know about him?” Hudson shrugged his shoulders.

“Nothing!” The two men looked at each other for a moment. “Oh — I once saw a book of poems,” he added.

“He wasn’t asleep,” said the old man. “Would it mean anything to him?”

“I’m not sure. He isn’t exactly stupid.”

“Send me the poems.”

“I believe they’re only old ones.”

“Never mind — if they’re not out of print.” He noticed his son-in-law’s puzzled look and answered it with an impatient gesture:

“I can’t tell — of course, they’ll probably be no use whatever. And I dare say we shan’t need to do anything. But we may; and in that case anything may come in useful. Only God send we shall not be driven to employing these melodramatic methods. The Brothers seem more and more disposed towards them every year. Perhaps they are becoming more and more necessary.” The speaker leaned his arm wearily on the table. “Otto,” he said, “I sometimes feel I’m beginning to lose my grasp of the whole development.” He paused, and gazed reflectively at the back of his fingers, while Hudson shot him a single quick curious look.

“Were you there —” he went on slowly — “I forget — when we considered the matter of — semi-initiation? It seems likely to give more and more trouble.”

“No, Sir, I was not there.”

“Then I mustn’t say anything more about it.” He rose to his feet. “We’ll sleep on this,” he said. “Everything gets more and more irregular. People no longer seem to know how much they know . . . or how much they don’t, for that matter. I have people coming to me — you’d never dream the sort of grade they stand on — in nearly everything. They talk to me for an hour — two — and it isn’t till just before they go that they let fall something by accident that explains why they were sent. Yes. I see difficult times ahead — very difficult times. And how do I know how much longer I shall be in the body, to deal with them? Well — good night, Otto!”

“Good night, Sir!”

The next morning Gerald left Klosters for London by an early train, but not until Sir Otto had taken him aside and apologised for not having introduced him to his father-in-law on the occasion of their accidental encounter on the previous night. He was eccentric — nervous — as Margaret had possibly explained — Gerald shook his head — well, in any case, he was, and he preferred that no stranger should know, even of his presence in the house. In the circumstances he (Sir Otto) had not felt justified in thrusting an unexpected introduction on him in the small hours of the morning, after the long and exhausting conversation which had kept them up till that hour. Gerald declared that all the apologies were due from himself, especially as he had “for a few minutes” unwittingly played the part of an eavesdropper; and with these words he felt he had practically cleared his conscience of last night’s lie.

Just before leaving the house he paid a last flying visit to the library, picked up the Encyclopedia, which still lay on the window-sill behind the screen, and looked for the name of the author of the Carlyle article, in case it should be anyone he knew. Finding the initials ‘A. C.’ printed unobtrusively at the end of the last paragraph he turned to the index of authors at the beginning of the first volume and learned, with some surprise and much interest, that they stood for ‘Adela Cranage.’

CHAPTER LIV

Up to the last moment, Gerald had hoped that Margaret might be coming up to town by his train. It was her odd distaste for travelling alone, which had brought him to Klosters at all, and he knew that she intended in any case to be in town the same evening, for she had been given a ticket for the first performance of a new opera, which she was determined not to miss. Lady Hudson, who was also coming up to town, could not get away until later in the week, and Margaret was to await her there and then spend a few days together with her in the flat, before she returned to Loomfield.

During breakfast Gerald heard a certain amount of mild bickering between the two, from which it quickly appeared that most of Margaret’s nervousness had already disappeared. She was absolutely determined to go on ahead to London and even suggested sleeping alone in the flat, which was at the moment quite empty of servants and locked up. At length, however, it was agreed that she should go to a hotel for two nights, after which Sir Otto and Lady Hudson would be returning to the flat themselves.

Then came the question, whether she would get away in time for Gerald’s train — to be answered eventually in the negative. There was too much to do, she

decided reluctantly so soon after the party, and the reluctance at any rate cheered Gerald a little. He had been preposterously depressed at the trouble she was taking to get herself to that opera — on the day he was leaving!

When he discovered that she did not intend to come to the station with him in the car, his depression returned, but all the way there he kept asking himself eagerly if she had not perhaps pressed his hand a little harder, a little longer, than usual. In point of fact, seeing him hat in hand standing on the doorstep, Margaret had suddenly remembered once more how different she felt now from what she had felt on the day she left Loomfield. She had told him accordingly, as they shook hands, 'how much it had meant' to her; whereupon he had stopped her immediately, insisting on the contrary that it was impossible to express how much the joyous little interlude had meant to him. And then, on a kind of desperate impulse, he had added, softening the remark with a jesting intonation:

"You won't desert me altogether now?" and she had laughed and dropped her lashes over her eyes.

Most of the journey to town was spent by him in trying to analyse the exact meaning of her laugh. There were intervals, it is true, when the events of the previous night played into his speculations, but then they seemed to be so unreal, so utterly unimportant, beside the mystery of Margaret's affections, that they quickly retired again into the shadows. Besides he knew that, if he thought further about these events, they would lead him back again to that complicated psychological fussery into which he was just now so annoyed at having been led astray at all. He thought with distaste, for instance, of the kind of eager questions John might be expected to ask about that conversation between Sir Otto and his mysterious father-in-law, and was glad that the ordinary obligations of honour would prevent him from revealing it. As to the Encyclopedia article, there was a time when the discovery of its authorship would have sickened and exasperated him. But now — how long does one keep hold of a person's hand, in the ordinary way, when one is shaking it? 'Bundle of nerves' indeed! How amazingly little John must have understood her all this time! And they were simply making each other more and more unhappy!

Arrived at the terminus, he took a frugal lunch, sinking all the time deeper and deeper into his intolerably vivid memory of the last few days. The return to London, by bringing back all the associations of his ordinary life, made these same days stand out even more distinctly from the rest than they had yet done. Suddenly the level voice of judgment and experience spoke in him with a calm certainty, saying: Such a holiday comes once in ten or twenty years — once in a life-time: there is no possible method of repeating it. And Gerald heard the voice and — deliberately shut his ears to it. Its message was too atrocious. Instead he clung desperately to the belief that his life during the last few days had been simply the normal life, and that he had only been excluded from it hitherto by a series of misfortunes and errors. He became almost feverish in his self-insistence on this point, and as he walked unseeing through London to his destination, kept murmuring over and over again to himself — as if constant repetition would make it true: Something must come of it! . . . something must come of it! . . . Something must come of it!

Early in the afternoon he reached the building in which he had to interview his future employer, the Sales Manager of an enormous emporium which was slowly spreading its tentacular branches over outer London. He was shown into a large airy office, where a short, thickset man, in a waisted coat and trousers that were tighter at the bottom than at the top, sat in a large swivel-chair before a table covered with all sorts of printed papers.

His face and neck were so close-shaven that they looked as if they were scrubbed with Vim every morning. As Gerald came in, he greeted him, without looking up, with a loud

“Cheerio! Sit down! Just wait a minute, please.” and immediately picked up a speaking-tube and dictated a short and rather cheeky letter down it. Later on Gerald discovered that the Sales Manager always did this when anyone came into his office for the first time — unless of course it were anyone of overwhelming importance. Meanwhile he had time to look round at the walls of the office. Of a shiny chocolate-brown colour, they were profusely adorned with commercial calendars, trade caricatures, photographs of white-faced and shirted dinner-parties, some snapshots of the Sales Manager, all smiles, in the company of equally smiling ladies, and dominating all the rest, a series of booster texts, printed in red and black on plain white cards, which bore such legends as

Time is Money!

or

Thanks! We know all about the weather already!

They reminded Gerald of the religious texts, with which pious aunts had once used to present him, especially the one which hung a little crooked on the end wall opposite to where they sat. This one had actually burgeoned into verse:

When things in the world seem all agley
And business is all bum,
A ten-pound look and a stuck-out chin
Helps some, my boy, helps some!

Gerald had five clear minutes in which to absorb the quality of these texts and fit it as best he could to his present mood. And then the spruce Manager suddenly twiddled round on his swivel chair:

“Well now, Mr. Marston . . .” he began in a nasal voice.

Half an hour later, Cooperative Rubber and Hardware’s newest salesman, assured not only of a happy and prosperous career, but also of steadily increasing strength of will, arrived at Humphrey Trinder’s rooms. He was not looking forward to seeing Humphrey, nor indeed to anything in particular. Nevertheless he was taken by surprise for a moment, when the door was opened, not by Humphrey himself, as he had expected, but by a stout charwoman, whom he had never seen before, and who greeted him at once with a smile so broad that it was evidently

intended to be especially significant of something — though what he could not determine. The strange woman and the smile together somehow confused him, so that he could not for a moment think what to say.

“Is — er — is there anybody in?” he asked at length.

“The other gentleman ain’t come in yet, Sir.” The woman stepped respectfully aside to let him pass, and in he walked. He hung up his hat and went into the sitting-room.

“Shall I get you some tea, Sir?” said the woman eagerly, coming into the room behind him, “I’ve found out where all the things are.” And once again, with her eyes fixed on him, she smiled wonderfully amply and with an expression that seemed to say: ‘Ah, we know something, you and I, between us — eh?’ This time, however, he did not even notice the smile; for he felt mentally sick, so sick that there actually seemed to be something wrong with the sunlight. He sat looking at it through the window. It was too empty, somehow, to be true! The charwoman brought in a breakfast-cup full of tea and a slice of bread and butter. Suddenly Gerald was astonished to hear himself saying to her in a curious thick voice:

“There isn’t a message for me, I suppose?” He hardly knew what he meant; and his heart stood quite still, when the smiling woman, smiling more significantly than ever, nodded her head, and replied:

“Yes, Sir. Will you meet the lady at 7.30 outside the main entrance? She ’as another ticket.” After a few seconds Gerald answered with elaborate unconcern:

“Thank you!” And then he added, as if by an afterthought: “Oh — who brought it? Is there a note or anything?”

“It come on the telephone, Sir. The young lady ’erself, I think it was. someone by the name of Marjorie, would it be?”

“Margaret!” said Gerald. “That’s alright; thank you, Mrs. — er — let me see, you didn’t tell me your name?” He looked up at her, and smiled kindly. After all, she had a pleasant manner! And now he understood the smile!

“Mrs. Hannaford, Sir!” As soon as the woman left the room, Gerald got up and began pacing to and fro. He looked frequently at his watch. A quarter-of-an-hour later Mrs. Hannaford knocked at the door once again. “I’m going now, Sir!” she said. “I think you’ll find everything in its place quite all right.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Hannaford. I’m sure we shall. Good night!” And as soon as the door closed behind her, he went on pacing up and down the room. Then he went over to the bookshelves and taking out one volume after another endeavoured in vain to settle down to read. Between each attempt he looked again at his watch. When at last it said six o’clock, he took his bag into the bedroom and began dressing. Three quarters of an hour later, he had put on a mackintosh and white silk muffler, over his evening clothes and was just reaching up for his hat, when he heard a key turn in the front-door. Humphrey seemed to be a little out of breath.

“Hullo, Gerald!” he said, as he came in. “Have you been here long? Sorry, old thing, I meant to get back much earlier than this.” He looked round him rather uneasily. “Did Mrs. Hannaford let you in?” he asked.

“Yes — and gave me tea.”

“Good! As a matter of fact, that was another reason why I wanted to get back. I’ve got a new woman. Never even seen her yet, and I didn’t particularly want to

miss her altogether on her first day. Still, it seems to have been O.K." Humphrey had about him this evening, Gerald noticed, that peculiar and rather exasperating absence which he sometimes displayed in conversation, when he would seem, all the time he was talking to you, to be anxious about something else — to be afraid of missing something that might be going on round the corner.

"Mrs. Hannaford didn't say anything about a message for me, I suppose?" he asked.

"Message?" For the second time that evening Gerald's heart stood still, while his brain worked with feverish rapidity. In a fraction of a second he had unravelled the little knot of errors tied by Mrs. Hannaford's having foolishly mistaken him for the owner of the flat. He had time in that fraction to see everything — even the all too simple explanation of her significant smile — and then he said in a clear voice:

"Yes. There's a message from Margaret. You're to be outside the main entrance at 7.30."

"7.30." exclaimed Humphrey. "Lady Hudson rang up this morning and said she was anxious about her, and would I meet her after the opera and take her home."

"Yes. Well, she's got you a ticket!"

"Hm. She said Margaret was going to try and do that as soon as she got to town — but I didn't think there was an earthly. Anyway I thought it wouldn't be till 8-0. I say, I'm awfully sorry about you. I suppose she knew you wouldn't mind. Her mother said she simply couldn't bear the idea of dragging anyone out at half-past-eleven for nothing."

"Don't talk so much!" said Gerald shortly. "You've only got forty minutes to do it in." Humphrey looked at his watch.

"By Gum! So I have! I say — do you mind —?" He went into his bedroom.

"By the way!" he called out through the neck of his shirt, "where were you off to when I came in?"

"I?" said Gerald, once more ratiocinating with feverish rapidity "— oh — I was just going along to the post-office before it shuts."

"Here — come back! I've got tons of stamps!"

"Thanks . . . it's a registered letter! You won't have time for grub now, will you? See you when you come in. Hope you enjoy it. I must fly." The door slammed. Humphrey glanced up and listened for a moment with a faintly perplexed expression on his face; then he resumed his incontinent jabbering at a pair of cuff links, while Gerald strolled down the street (towards the Post-Office, in case Humphrey should look out after him) whispering to himself ferociously, "You ass! You absolute, utter, footling ASS!"

CHAPTER LV

John had always supposed that, should he be left alone for any length of time, it would be a good opportunity for work. There were so many things, books he wanted to read, people to be called on, his poem to go on with — so many activities which, because they were not absolutely essential, he had hitherto had to postpone owing to the demands which Margaret's dubious condition made on his care and attention.

With all this accumulating mass of possible activities he hoped, now that she was in safe hands, not his, to be able to catch up. And indeed, the first day after she left, his mind was fully occupied from morning till night, not excluding mealtimes, during which he once more enjoyed the almost forgotten luxury of reading. On the next day, however, tired as he was with the somewhat feverish hurry of the previous one, life did not march quite so smoothly. The idea that time could be saved by reading at meals proved, as it had so often done before, to be a fallacy, owing to the incessant losing of your place on the page and the bother of hunting for it again. Moreover two or three books, which had remained for months on his shelves, or in the library, as almost unbearably appetizing temptations, appeared, now that there was nothing to prevent him settling down to them for two or three hours on end, to have lost the power of awakening his interest. He tried to add something to his poem, but that too turned out to be, in his present state of mind, unthinkable.

During all the little transitional moments of the day, when there was no particular thing to occupy him, his thoughts, like a swarm of angry bees, continued to buzz incessantly round about Margaret and her state of mind. Apparently it was only in the external sense that she had gone away. Within, terribly deep, down in the very furthest recesses of his soul, she was no less there than before, refusing to keep still, creating incessantly just the sort of endless pain and disturbance that Jonah must have caused to the whale. This powerful sense of her being 'there' all the time also produced great difficulties when he attempted to write to her. No words that he put down on paper looked genuine or sincere; if he actually wrote out part of the incessant wordless dialogue that went between himself and the uneasy, protesting spirit who troubled his vitals, and whose name was Margaret, it looked hideously morbid, or too coldly argumentative. Yet apart from this he could utter nothing but formalities. To be intimate or playful, in the present state of affairs, could not possibly sound anything but hollow and forced.

Of Janet, meanwhile, he saw very little, owing to her exceptionally heavy duties through the period of the election. And by the time five days had passed, he was in a state of gloom such as, five days ago, he would not have conceived it possible that Margaret's absence could any longer cause him. But was it her absence — or was it simply their unsatisfactory relation, jangling incessantly on, like an unresolved discord, inside him, that would not let him rest? Then, on the morning of polling-day, he received her little note from Klosters. The effect was startling. Slight as it was, it appeared to possess the magic property of removing every particle of woe; so that all the rest of that day he went about his tasks with a light heart and a great sense of looking forward again.

Towards tea-time on the same day Janet just managed to get over, in order to tell him that Metcalfe had rung up from Ferroceter, saying that Streeter already had enough votes to make his return certain. In the mood of elation that followed this announcement, John sat down and wrote his letters to Gerald and Margaret; and after getting the two short notes safely off by the country post, he settled down in a calmer frame of mind than he had known for some months to work at his poem.

A few days later Margaret returned from town; John had been hungrily awaiting the event and, as soon as they were alone, clung to her with a kind of desperation that surprised them both. She responded. All their sufferings seemed

forgotten, and they were taken back for a moment to the wonderful days when he had used to come home to her from Weldon at the end of term.

During the next few weeks they lived together in a happy silence. Margaret was infinitely better. And the prospect of some practical steps being taken to deal with the grotesque evil of needless penury had taken the strain from John's mind, so that he was able in the meantime to feel a renewed interest in those practical problems of charitable relief with which, as a working curate, he was faced. This was an activity which they could share; and it served to draw them still closer together.

But underneath, all the time the unspoken differences remained. If the silence in which they lived was the outcome of happiness, it was also partly the outcome of fear — a fear of dropping back into the troubled waters from which they had just emerged.

John in particular was terribly afraid of stirring up once more the muddy sediment of strife. He was happier, but far more timorous than before. But that was the way he was made. He could acclimatize himself to a painful situation, once it had begun, and bear it almost unflinchingly but the actual beginning of it, or the relapse from an interlude of ease, would threaten to break him up altogether. For this reason, when he was in the Army, he had resolved never to come home on leave from France, if he got there, since the return from leave merely to a training depot on this side of the water had been such an appalling experience. It is true, the armistice had prevented the strength of this resolution from actually being put to the test. Now at any rate he was simply terrified of dropping back once more into an already almost forgotten existence of strenuous and unbroken effort.

Consequently he never became quite at ease. When he seemed likely to do so, just as all the pains were finally lulled asleep, Margaret herself would often unwittingly startle them back to a furtive life by one of her remarks. Full of contrition over her failure in the past to enter more sympathetically into his interests, she was trying now to indicate in various little ways that she had been thinking about them and was really concerned. These were painful moments for John, moments during which his being was rent mercilessly between an immediate response to her generosity and, on the other side, a perception, made a thousand times miserably clearer by that very generosity, of the gulf that really yawned between their attitudes and conceptions. She had not been home twenty-four hours before she herself introduced the subject of Streeter's return to Parliament, adding — with an enquiring glance towards John — that she was glad because "he would be able to help the unemployment a lot." John nodded.

They were together much more often in the next few weeks than they had been before; for he deliberately fended off Mr. Trumpett and his myrmidons, in order to be alone with her. He became, moreover, in his determination to keep hold of this new-found intimacy, quite ruthless in his neglect of work. Consequently he knew less of what was going on outside than he would otherwise have done. All the time at the back of his mind he had the feeling that Streeter's Bill, when it was introduced, must be the beginning, however modest, of a new era — an era in which he and Margaret would once more be able to work together in the spirit, because the stupid ugly problem of the flesh, which had come to engross all his attention, would at last have been removed. For then the rest of the world would at any rate begin to

be as free as they were already. Until the Bill came in, therefore, he was content to wait nor to bother his head any more about politics and finance.

The first reminder that events were still moving came from Janet. She had come over to say goodbye, before following Dodge up to London, and it soon appeared that she had lately seen Metcalfe again and learnt something from him. Unfortunately John was only able to get a vague idea of what this was. Janet seemed disinclined to recall much of her interview with Metcalfe, and indeed all three of them were somewhat uneasy on the subject. Moreover it soon appeared that Metcalfe himself had not been too communicative. His whole attitude, said Janet, seemed to have changed — and not for the better — since that genial night when he had knocked them all up so late. He had evidently seen Dodge again once or twice, and had gone so far as to reveal to her that the latter was now beginning to perceive in Streeter's proposals difficulties which he had previously overlooked. Metcalfe himself had given no indication as to whether he saw eye to eye with Dodge on the matter or not. She only knew that the idea of his going abroad to take up Dodge's work there had been temporarily abandoned. For the present he was to stay in town. She herself was to return to Luci in a few weeks, in order to put Dodge's private affairs in order.

The next evening Mr. Trumpett brought in a copy of the Daily Snapshot, in order to show John a paragraph on the 'London Gossip' page, which ran as follows:

I passed Mr. Streeter this morning walking down Whitehall, in a bowler hat and a quiet grey suit. He looked very cool and collected and no-one would have dreamed that he carries about in his pockets the highly original financial measure with which (I am credibly informed) he intends to startle us all, if he is given office under the new government.

John looked up from the paper and stared significantly at Mr. Trumpett. He explained to Trumpett all that he had heard through Janet from Metcalfe and both agreed that the secret must have leaked out somewhere and that the opposing forces, which had evidently begun to bring pressure to bear on Dodge, were probably massing for a Press campaign. Both knew quite well how carefully these chit-chat columns were edited and the paragraph which Trumpett had found was obviously one of the first seeming-desultory shots.

It was John himself who discovered in the City columns of the same number of the Snapshot a little paragraph to the following effect:

The fall of the pound sterling yesterday by three more points against the dollar has begun to attract the serious attention of the City. Although in well-informed circles it is no longer considered possible to regard the weakness which has marked the last five days as merely incidental to normal fluctuation, still no-one appears able yet to give any satisfactory reason for the abnormality. Should the sterling level drop another five points, a group of influential personalities, whom the City will be encouraged to regard as its representatives, will immediately meet to discuss the causes and Endeavour to locate the mysterious factor which is reacting adversely on the national credit.

CHAPTER LVI

They were not mistaken. From that day forth began an elaborate Press Campaign against Streeter, which slowly but steadily increased in intensity, till he was being bombarded on every side and with every conceivable kind of weapon, from argument (to which he was officially forbidden, by Dodge, to reply) down to animadversions on his private life. From the Gossip and Society columns it crept to the City page and from there into the Leading-articles. The Weeklies and Monthlies took it up next, and even little sporting sheets had something to say about the effect of a lowered exchange on our chances at the International Games.

As time went on, however, the barrage of words became concentrated less on Streeter's and more exclusively on the phrase 'Releasing Loan,' which he had been betrayed at some unexpected interview into applying to his proposed Bill. The whole thing was conducted with great skill and a really artistic sense of the value of crescendo.

The campaign took the dramatic form of a gradual revelation, punctuated here and there with sharp discoveries. Thus, one day an article would appear in a newspaper of a certain political complexion, discussing the 'Releasing Loan' from a definite point of view and even approving of it. It might perhaps be assumed in the article that the Loan was intended to 'release' consumption by means of 'consumer credits' or a systematic extension of the instalment-selling method. The next day another article in a journal of the opposite political complexion would reply to the first article with a battery of highly technical arguments, all directed to show that 'consumer credits' were dangerous or inexpedient. And then a few days later articles would appear simultaneously in both journals explaining that they had been misinformed as to the nature of Streeter's 'Releasing Loan' which apparently had nothing whatever to do with 'Consumer credits,' but involved much more radical measures, which they refrained from even mentioning owing to the adverse effect it might have on our already weakened credit. Credit is such a delicate affair, depending on such subtle, psychological adjustments, so easily upset and so forth and ditto and so forth. There was absolutely nothing to be said therefore for increasing apprehension by dragging into the light of day proposals which would otherwise, in all probability, never see that light at all. For as soon as they were submitted (as they would certainly have to be before they were brought forward publically) to the financial experts, they would reveal themselves as chimerical and never be heard of again.

To all this sort of thing the new Government replied with silence. Dodge had lost no time in forming his Cabinet and had impressed on all of its members the advisability of maintaining silence until the opening of Parliament in September, when he would say all that was necessary in his reply to the Debate on the Address. He assured them that he was having due regard to all considerations, involving the opinions both of industry and finance, whose representatives he frequently saw. The Inner Cabinet, with which he actually intended to govern, consisted of himself as Prime Minister, Streeter, whom he had appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the new Minister of Labour, a business-man who had entered politics late in life and had a newspaper reputation for hard-headedness.

There was one especially moving meeting of this little Cabinet within the Cabinet, at which Dodge assured his two colleagues that it was impossible to say how much was now at stake — not merely the maintenance or fall of the Government, but the whole question whether the nation should be governed from Westminster at all. He implored them with tears in his eyes to stand by him, and to use all their influence towards persuading the rest of the Cabinet to do the same. Both of them were touched by his eloquence and both agreed. Streeter thought he was alluding to the danger of government from Lombard Street, and the Minister of Labour thought he was alluding to the danger of government from Fleet Street. Dodge himself did not yet know which he meant. No one else besides these two was really in his confidence, and the anxiety of the rest of the Cabinet concerning the slow but steady fall of the exchange and the many rumours about Streeter had to appease itself as best it might with the comforting thought that the Minister of Labour at any rate possessed both 'the Circulation' and 'the Post-office.'

The Press Campaign went on. Alongside of the phrase 'Releasing Loan' there began to appear more and more frequently the word 'inflation,' till at length the two terms were — in the general mind — synonymous. 'The proposed Releasing Loan' or 'Streeter's Inflation Policy' — it was all the same thing, as far as the Press was concerned. A special Anti-Inflation Society was formed, and rapidly acquired a large capital sum from the donations of frightened annuity-holders. It circulated leaflets and hung posters describing the miseries of the professional and rentier class in Central Europe during inflation time, and one poster in particular found its way all over the country, before the Society's activities were suppressed by the Home Secretary amid the indignant outcries and lavish quotations from the Areopagitica of a liberty-loving Press. It was brief and to the point, containing simply a drawing of a loaf, a sum of money, and two words, thus:

[drawing of a loaf] = £1,000,000. Remember Germany!

Direct advertisement against the Government having been thus vetoed, the newspapers found their own way out. They began to increase the size of their posters outside the Newsagents' shops and sometimes to reproduce thereon the cartoon to be found in their pages. This was a fair advertisement and could not have been suppressed without an uproar. One of Smiler's cartoons in particular soon became in this way as familiar as their family photographs to three quarters of the population of the British Isles. It represented a pound note in the act of running away from a loaf of bread, at which it was turning round to make a long nose. The loaf, obviously puffed and on its last legs, held out its hands appealingly, while far away in the distance a thin, staved-looking "Mr. Plain Man" was struggling hopelessly to catch up with both. The cartoon was drawn with the utmost cleverness and economy. It was so funny that you could not possibly avoid laughing at it.

Needless to say, the obstinate silence of the Government in face of all this criticism and defamation had the effect of lending wings to rumour, which, as the reassembly of Parliament drew on, became bolder and more variegated every week. Any little tit-bit of information, or alleged information, was fastened on greedily by

the pressmen and given a really prominent place beside the current murder or divorce.

As a matter of fact one small unassuming weekly had been for years expounding to a small but faithful band of subscribers the ideas of Hicks and Cameron. It contained nothing else but comments on public affairs in the light of those ideas and had subsisted from birth on charity, since the advertising concerns boycotted it to a man. About this time Prices, as the little journal was called, suddenly sent its circulation up for one week to fifty times the normal figure. This was because it came out with a full-dress statement of Streeter's plans, attributing its information to 'an authentic source' which, however, it refused to disclose. It challenged the Government to deny that its prognostication was substantially correct and claimed the answering silence as a justification of all that it had said — though, as the Government merely continued to maintain the silence which it had observed throughout, it was hard to see on what grounds.

The 'Releasing Loan,' it said, was to be a Government Loan open to public subscription and underwritten by the Bank of England. It would be regarded, to begin with, as a distinct and separate part of the Consolidated Fund, and its proceeds would be applied solely to the business of releasing the potential production of the nation by removing the financial clog on its consumption. There would be no Sinking Fund. It would bear interest, but at a purely nominal rate, certainly not more than one per cent. By a Government undertaking to make up the difference out of the proceeds of the loan, wholesalers of certain commodities not yet specified would be encouraged to sell at some figure less than the cost price. In the first place the commodities chosen would be such as were notoriously under-consumed in the home-market. The retail price would be left to come down of its own accord, and the price to the consumer would thus immediately be reduced.

A staff of actuaries and accountants was already at work, so Prices affirmed, determining at what fraction of their cost to the producer these goods could properly be wholesaled. This must depend on the extent to which potential production exceeded actual production; and it was according to their figures that Streeter proposed to regulate the amount of the Loan which he would put into general circulation. He did not however intend, to begin with, to apply the whole of this amount to the reduction of prices; he would keep a moiety in the Treasury and apply it to the reduction of income-tax and to such reforms as the immediate raising of the school leaving-age. This would be altered to 18, as soon as buildings could be found to house the extra number of pupils.

The rate of interest at which the 'Releasing Loan' was to be issued — suggested 'Prices' mischievously — would perhaps provide a better test of 'patriotism' than the nice fat War Bonds about which so much noise had been made at the time! The chances of a wide response were, to say the least of it, exiguous. Accordingly it was believed to be within the bounds of possibility that the Bank might refuse to comply with Government's request to underwrite the 'loan.' In which case it was to be "instructed" to comply. That failing, a Bill would immediately be introduced to give the Government the necessary powers and, as the Industrialists had been returned with quite a comfortable majority, there was no serious doubt of its getting through.

Certain sections of the Press, which had hitherto united in ignoring this uppish little journal, now published articles on the alleged disclosure. These consisted largely of speculations as to the source of the information, which, if true, was taken by the Right as confirming its worst fears of an 'inflationist' chancellor and by the Left as confirming its worst fears of a 'bourgeois' chancellor. The Right bemoaned the lost honour of Britain, printed the word 'Loan' in inverted commas, and at the same time scornfully derided this pitiful attempt to hoodwink the public by describing a spade as an agricultural implement. The Left derided their derision, asking in what respect, other than the rate of interest the proposed (sic) loan differed from the bulk of war-finance. Their quarrel was a different one. The scheme would lead, they said, to a general increase of incomes but not to an equality of incomes — which was the true desideratum.

Meanwhile the exchange continued steadily falling. Long before the day of the opening of Parliament it had passed a figure which many pundits had solemnly assured the public it could not possibly pass without involving the country in a wholesale cataclysm. The financial world was righteously indignant, the industrial world excited and a little anxious, and the few detached spirits, who remembered the prophecies of the pundits for a long enough time wondered vaguely why, instead of these prophecies being fulfilled, the financial world merely went on being righteously indignant and the industrial world went on being excited and a little anxious. In point of fact the financial world was busy transferring its long-term loans abroad, while the industrial world quickly absorbed an increasing quantity of short term loans, as it expanded under the genial influence of a steadily increasing flow of orders from those foreign consumers, who had already begun to feel the effect on British prices of a depreciated pound.

For these reasons, and because the country as a whole was at last becoming — very vaguely — alive to the fact that what is written in the newspapers expresses no one's opinion but the proprietor's — the stern pronouncements which were constantly appearing in the leading articles to the effect that the Government 'must' give way to 'popular opinion' and disclose its plans, melted quietly away into thin air. And so the wordy battle continued to rage unabated, until the day came for the opening of Parliament.

Towards the end of his speech on the Address Dodge remarked that, as there had been a great deal of speculation and some misapprehension as to the Government's plans for dealing with Unemployment and with the industrial situation in general, he proposed to make there and then as full and clear a statement as possible of his intentions. The Government intended, as early as possible in the session to apply to the Bank for a 'Releasing Loan.' At this point in his speech the Prime Minister paused, in order to allow the murmurs of angry protest and the general stir of anticipation and excitement among the members to subside. He understood, he then went on, with the well-known twinkle in his rather narrow eyes, that the phrase 'Releasing Loan,' was already not altogether unknown outside the Government, though how that had come about he could not say. What was apparently not so well known was the actual meaning of the phrase. (Hear! Hear!). The 'Releasing Loan,' then, was to be a purely temporary accommodation raised solely to meet the expenses involved in the Government's policy of 'releasing' as

many as possible of the employees in the stagnant and decaying trades for transfer either to the Colonies as emigrants, or to other parts of this country where it was hoped their labour would eventually be absorbed. The Government would pay four-and-a-half per cent interest.

At this point there was a mild uproar in the house. Many members stared very hard at Streeter, who however was leaning well back in his seat with his hat tilted forward over his eyes. When the uproar had subsided, Dodge, as if bowing gracefully before the storm, himself glanced over at Streeter with an air of asking his permission, and then said that he would add one thing. It was also true that his honourable friend, entirely as a private individual, as a private thinker, had certain proposals for what he might perhaps allow himself to call a more revolutionary remedy! Hence, no doubt, the general confusion and the strong feelings which his own announcement had aroused in certain parts of this House. Into the nature of these proposals he was not now going to enter. The time was not ripe. They were absolutely a matter for the experts. Accordingly a committee of experts would immediately be set up to examine thoroughly into them and report on their practicability!

In reply to a rather petulant question concerning the personnel of the proposed committee, Dodge assured the House warmly that it would be lifted above all party considerations. He could not yet give them a complete list. The names of experts and business-men would shortly be announced. He could however take them a little way into his confidence. Two persons had already been approached. When he told them that on the one hand Sir Otto Hudson (Ministerial cheers) and on the other hand Sir James Killigrew (Opposition cheers) — whose services in tendering his advice on similar occasions had only recently won him the well-deserved recognition of knighthood (renewed opposition and Ministerial cheers) — when he told them that two men not only of such tried level-headedness and impartiality, but also (and this was diametrically opposite political convictions, were among the first who had consented to serve, then he felt sure that both those whose hopes had been raised unduly and those whose fears had been raised unduly by irresponsible rumours concerning the Releasing Loan would rest content in the certain knowledge that whatever of value his honourable friend had to contribute to their consideration of the grave dangers with which the nation was faced, would be tested and sifted thoroughly and the pure gold given to the nation! Dodge concluded his speech by saying that Government did not bring forward its releasing policy as in any sense a panacea — you would not really cure anything with pills — not even indigestion! (laughter). For their part they would be well satisfied if they felt they had begun to attack the problem on the right lines. Fortunately, as far as Unemployment was concerned, the problem already showed signs of diminishing in intensity. He quoted some figures and concluded by appealing to the Opposition not to put unnecessary obstructions in his path; wherever it was possible — and above all in these grave questions of national welfare — let them all work together, shoulder to shoulder, trickling the ball where necessary (sometimes it was absolutely necessary for the centre-forward to keep the ball to himself for a time), passing it to another player when it was for the good of the Side. Then, he felt sure

— not perhaps this year, nor next, nor indeed in any particular year — they could not fail to kick the football of this great Empire through the goal of prosperity.

He sat down amid the somewhat tepid applause of the Government benches and proceeded to draw pictures of little men in top hats on his notes, while the Leader of the Opposition rose to congratulate him bitterly on having found a new name for the policy which every government, without exception, had pursued for the last fifteen years.

During the next few days the wrath and contempt of the Press were unparalleled. It was almost incredible, they fulminated, that the helm of State should have fallen into the hands of a man who apparently lacked the most elementary sense of responsibility. Let him play his games of peek-a-boo and April fooling, if he chose, but let him play them with his children in the nursery! A word of explanation two months ago would have saved untold apprehension, untold damage to the stability of the national credit, to the honour of Britain's name. Had he only thought fit to define his 'Releasing Loan' in July instead of the day before yesterday, the pound to-day would still be worth four dollars, instead of two. The cost in human misery was incalculable — and all to satisfy some incomprehensible whim of a pranking schoolboy Premier! Nay, what guarantee had they that these criminal practical jokes would not be repeated? It was time for the nation to speak. There must be no paltering, nor on the other hand must there be any palaver. The Government must be at once told quietly but firmly, and by a united nation, that henceforth it did not intend to have its fortunes heartlessly played with as the pawns of party.

But a few days later Dodge had to make to his constituents on the occasion of some local celebration, a speech which was broadcast to the whole nation. He began by pointing out the conspicuous improvement in the Unemployment figures which had marked the last two months. And he pledged himself there and then not to make any further alteration in the economic adjustments of the nation, such as would result in our losing this advantage. If a return to dollar parity would mean a return to the higher Unemployment figure, then let us stay where we were!

And then the Premier played his trump card. Referring to the recent loudly trumpeted indignation of the Pressmen, he asked whose fault it was, if they had been misled. What had the Government done, except to maintain silence until the proper moment came for speaking? And, taking his audience into his confidence, Dodge proceeded to admit frankly that one of his objects in maintaining this inscrutable silence had been, precisely, to teach the Press a lesson. It was mere cant to go on pretending any longer that the Press represented the wishes and opinions of the nation. In the trustified Press you had a serious and growing problem to deal with. Other nations had their own method of dealing with it. Some preferred the muzzle, some the whip. Neither of these ways was the British way. He had been accused of practical joking! Well, there were worse methods than that of dealing with — he would not say, cads and bullies — with people who had grown too big for their boots! With Malvolios, should he say? The question might arise before long whether this country were to be governed by the people or the papers. He thought he knew the answer. He would not say it too loud. He dared not (laughter). It might get reported! (loud laughter).

Dodge seemed to have won. The speech was repeated in full next day practically without comment, and the whole attack on the Government began to lose its intensity, as it became increasingly clear that Dodge was winning a genuine reputation with the people as a 'strong man' — and a humorist into the bargain.

As to Gerald Marston, entirely submerged in his own disappointed affections, he had taken very little notice of the whole affair. It was not until he saw the headlines announcing Dodge's speech in Parliament and, buying a paper, glanced hurriedly through it, that he seriously connected all that was going on in the country with John and his hopes and fears. Now, however, he suddenly realised the terrible disappointment which this 'revelation' of Dodge's would be to John. His own sharp sense of disappointment — groundless though it was — aroused a tenderer sympathy, and he remembered how, partly from indifference, partly from uncertainty as to how much he was entitled to reveal of the conversation he had by accident overheard, he had not yet written anything at all to John about his experiences at Klosters.

Going over it again in his memory (and it surprised him how little of it he had lost), he began to see a closer and closer connection between the things which John had said to him, the things which he had heard Sir Otto and his father-in-law saying to one another, and these public events. The more he considered it, the less obligation he felt to maintain silence; and he ended by sitting down and writing John as exact an account as he could of the whole conversation.

CHAPTER LVII

One night, about a week after he received Gerald's letter, John lay awake in bed. They had stayed up, disputing, far into the night, and now that they had at last retired to rest, neither of them could sleep. He could tell by the sound of her breathing that Margaret was still awake, and he kept asking himself miserably if he had been appallingly callous and inconsiderate, to speak out as he had done. But what else could he have done? Yes, he ought to have had more imagination; the crassest fool should have been able to foresee the shock. Well, but supposing he hadn't spoken! Then she would simply have gone on being dissatisfied . . . still, she might have forgotten at last!

The sound of her breathing grew more regular, and he guessed that she had fallen asleep. That seemed to diminish the strain somewhat, so that he too relaxed the muscles about his heart and began to drowse. What a relief to be out of it! But just as he was dropping off, he heard, first an uneasy stirring in the other bed — and then a sudden movement, too sharp to be the natural accompaniment of sound sleep. In an instant his eyes were wide open again, his ears listening, his head aching. Margaret's breathing had grown irregular; there was an occasional catch in it; and now he heard her toss herself over on to the other side with a confused grumbling murmur that showed her to be still asleep. The murmur was repeated. John could not make out any words, but he realised that she had begun talking in her sleep; and this made him feel afraid. He listened intently. Soon she began to mumble and whisper again, but this time more articulately, so that he could hear something of what she said.

“Put it down! Put it down!” he heard her say in a quick anxious tone. And then in a hoarse whisper: “Don’t . . . Don’t!” and then her voice rose into a kind of wail. “Oh John! you couldn’t!” And she caught her breath once more with a curious little click.

The moment John heard her speak his own name in this way, an icy misery gripped hold of him. He felt as if he were quite alone in the room, and malevolent spectres were gathering and mowing at him in the darkness. In a frenzy of despair he suddenly leaped from his bed, and going over to hers, began to rouse her.

“Margaret, wake up! You’re dreaming — wake up!” he said and shook her by the shoulder. She began to stir uneasily. And, afraid of causing a shock by rousing her too suddenly from a nightmare, he took her into his arms, as she began to come to herself.

“Ah — what’s that? Where am I?” she said thickly, as she opened her eyes. And then suddenly full consciousness came flooding back to her with a rush. She whispered, spoke, cried out:

“John!” (Ah, he was there). “John!” (Yes, she was in his arms) “JOHN! I dreamed — oh God! I dreamed you were trying to murder me!” Margaret clung to John convulsively and buried her head in his breast. He lay still, with his arms clasped tightly round her, staring into the darkness, no longer afraid of anything, no longer hoping anything.

After a little while the tenacious influence of the nightmare began to wear off. Margaret thrust him a little from her, and began saying in a worried half defiant voice:

“I don’t want you to think that my dreaming like that was anything to do with what you said about father. I simply laugh at that!”

He replied, not so much to the words, as to the angry voice.

“Margaret, is it absolutely necessary to go on harping on that? I didn’t want to say anything at all about your father; and I shouldn’t have said anything, if you hadn’t forced me to.”

“I am quite sure I didn’t force you to!”

“Yes. You said I was hiding something that was worrying me and simply implored me to tell you what it was.” And, remembering the affectionate way in which she had coaxed him to let her share his burden, he added, with a certain dry sarcasm creeping into his voice: “Incidentally you said it in rather a different way from the way you’re talking now.”

For some time she did not reply to this. He knew she was working it all out in her head, and when she did speak, she began slowly, but gradually spoke quicker and quicker:

“You were going about with a glum face!” She paused. “You used to be frightfully distressed because you thought I didn’t tell you things. I was told I was ‘treating you like a dancing-partner,’ when I didn’t tell you what was the matter. Then, when I asked you to explain — because things had become so much better between us, and I was trying desperately hard to stop us dropping back into the habit of keeping silent about everything — you wouldn’t.” John was ready with his answer long before she had done.

"Yes, dear!" he said patiently: "I knew that was the reason. I only say you did force me to say something you didn't like, just as no doubt I forced you to on that awful night last year."

"I don't know what you mean! You never tried to make me sneer at your father!"

"Oh Margaret! It's hopeless! Whoever said you did?" He paused. Must he go back into that maze? There seemed to be no alternative.

"I only said" — he began very slowly, "I only said you said I had been distressed in the old days, when you didn't reveal what was worrying you, and therefore it was only fair for me to reveal my troubles now. I didn't suggest the troubles were the same! I gave your having said that as a reason for your not being offended with me for what I said." But long before he had finished, Margaret had begun to cry.

"Oh, what shall we do?" She burst out at last through her tears. "That's just it. I can't even be offended with you. It's so absolutely ridiculous!" She sobbed once or twice and then went on: "I always knew how it would be — right from the beginning. You seem to have got a kind of disease — almost from the moment we married. It began with that idea of yours about pictures — pictures we both liked — having some secret meaning that I couldn't understand!"

"I never said that!"

"You wouldn't have seen anything in them at all, I don't believe, if it hadn't been for me!" She paused for the breath, which her tears were making it more difficult to draw. And then she went on resentfully:

"That turned you against the Church."

"Margaret, what on earth are you saying? I'm not 'against the Church.'"

"And now it's drawn you into believing that my father's a kind of stage villain. Are you going mad?" He did not reply. "Are you going mad, I say?" she repeated angrily.

"You can't say that kind of thing behind people's backs!" she went on, with a sudden indignant movement of her body, which exasperated him much more than her actual words: "You can just come and say it to his face!"

"Oh, we've been through all this so many times!" he said.

"Well, what is there to prevent you saying it to his face? Will you come to town with me to-morrow and say it?"

"Oh, damn! Say what?"

"All you said to me about his plotting with — plotting to keep the people down!" John sighed.

"I thought I explained. He'd only think I was a crude young fool — or say he did. And so I should be if I did what you suggest. Of course he'd admit everything, and then say it was done for the general good — as a part of his ordinary responsibilities. Besides, how could I possibly let him know that Gerald has told me what he heard?"

"If he said it was for the general good, then he would say so, because he thinks it is for the general good."

"I suppose he does think that!" said John slowly and rather wonderingly, as the possibility dawned on him for the first time.

“Why are you afraid to let him know that Gerald told you — if it wasn’t a dishonourable thing for him to do? I thought you said it wasn’t dishonourable!” John did not reply. He was nonplussed.

“And I thought he was such a nice boy!” went on Margaret. “He was being so kind to me, just when I needed it, and all the time, apparently, he had some mysterious secret understanding with you. Oh, it’s all so horrible!” He thought she would begin to cry again.

“Oh Margaret!” he said, more gently than he had hitherto been speaking: “You are really not putting it fairly. There was no ‘secret understanding.’ I only asked him to let me know what he thought of — of everything.” And the moment he had spoken he knew she had not been listening.

“Suppose father’s right and you’re wrong!” she said suddenly in a new hard voice. “You think you know everything!” (Oh Lord! he thought miserably, it just keeps on hurting her till she has to cry out!) He awaited a worse storm of sobbing than ever. But, instead of breaking up, her voice only grew harder still:

“I think it’s very brave and unselfish of them to save people from themselves in — in the way you say they are.”

“Yes, I daresay it is,” he agreed woodenly.

“And that gentle, white-haired old man!” Margaret suddenly emitted a sharp scornful laugh: “You thought I didn’t know he was in the house! You think I’m an innocent little dupe! Oh, it’s too funny! You silly little boy!” John found nothing to say. He positively did not know now whether he was more afraid of her remaining in this defiant mood, or of the appalling upheavals through which she would have to pass, in order to come out of it again. When she did speak again, there was no sign as yet that the coldness and scorn in her voice were abating.

“It’s really such frightful nonsense, after all, to suppose people have a right to look after themselves. Look at a man like that Creever! What is he going to do with his ‘economic freedom?’ It’s all very well for him, I daresay, but you don’t think of all the other little girls he’ll be ‘free’ to assault!” John was quite surprised to discover that she had actually been thinking about his ‘economic freedom,’ and he realised at the same time, with an extra wave of despair, that her instinctive hostility to it sprang from much, much deeper roots than the sympathetic interest which she had recently been trying so hard to display. He had forgotten how much they had talked and disputed about it all, at the time when he had first become interested in Hicks and Cameron.

“After all —” he murmured, “Crime is crime.” And he added: “Creever would probably get Delirium Tremens — so that would solve that problem.”

“That’s brutal!” she said, in a shocked voice which positively infuriated him.

“Nobody has any idea,” she went on enthusiastically, “of all that people like my father are saving them from. His responsibilities must be terrible. That’s why he gets so tired, I expect. I’ve sometimes seen him so tired he could hardly stand!”

After a long pause John brought out very slowly:

“Then — even if I am right — you support him?”

“What do you mean? Yes.”

“Then —” said John — “there is no hope.” She did not speak again, and shortly afterwards began very quietly to cry.

“What it comes to,” he said bitterly, following up his thought, “is, that you are incapable of understanding either of us, and you trust your father more than you do me!”

She did not answer — only continued crying. She went on crying nearly all night, and in the morning told him she thought it was really a mistake their trying to live together at all. She felt she only got in his way. In any case she herself couldn't stand it any more — for a little while. She had written to town, to Suki Holmes, asking if she might spend a few days with her. She would go away there the next day, if possible, and — try and think what to do. She spoke in a calm expressionless voice, and John, after long hesitation, answered in the same dull tone that perhaps that was the best thing they could do. She left by the afternoon train.

CHAPTER LVIII

During the fortnight following Margaret's departure John had plenty of leisure for private reflection. The idea of a separation was by no means new to him, but this, like so many other ideas, had a different look about it and a different sound, when, instead of arising naturally out of his own mental processes, it was formally presented to him from an outside source. That the outside source should be Margaret herself made the difference all the greater. And now, this week, it was not only an idea he had to reflect on, but a practical foretaste of its realisation.

More and more, as the days passed, did he become convinced of the strength and intimacy of the bonds which linked them to one another. He had indeed often found out before that there were other links between human beings than the apparent ones of mutual harmony and happiness. For many times, when their relations had been far from harmonious, so that her presence had been a dismal enough affair, he had yet discovered, by an absence lasting longer than he expected, that the loneliness without her was worse. And now, during this fortnight, when he was obliged, as far as he could, to explore the whole situation in all its features, he experienced above all else the unspeakable, unfathomable depths at which their roots still appeared to be intertwined. The effort of living without her was tremendous and perpetual. Living with her had seemed like an effort, too — often enough. But it was nothing to this.

John believed that, if she was determined on a separation, he could make this effort. But it would leave him energy for very little else. And he wondered and wondered, recalling over and over again tiny events and chance words which might be symptomatic, what would really be best for her. Would she break down altogether, if she had to admit to herself that their marriage had been a mistake — to tear him wholly out of her life? Or would she settle back quickly into an older way of thinking and living? On the whole that seemed more probable. Indeed, he sometimes doubted if he had ever touched the depths of her conscious soul at all — she seemed so ready to set aside his judgment and all that he brought new to her, in order to keep her old pre-nuptial self intact. He remembered now, looking round her room in London, he had once wished it were possible for her to remain single and marry him at the same time. But was not that just what she had done? Had she not kept that little room, white-enamelled, with all its photographs and books,

untouched, unaltered, fast locked, somewhere within her? And then he would remember some other part of their life together; and all such fancies would seem sentimental — ridiculous.

And yet, if their roots were really as deeply intertwined as he felt them to be, why all this conflict? A 'conflict between social and domestic obligations' — the phrase came back to him from some reverie of the past. Yes, but what conflict? All the ordinary social obligations such as entertaining friends and the parish work used to be fulfilled by them together. And how easily and smoothly it all went — with no waste of energy, no misgivings as to whether you were using your powers to the best effect, no devastating excess of fatigue afterwards. You gave your best, and it was made better still by her. What conceivable social obligations then had he had to fulfil at the expense of his domestic ones? About a year ago he had begun to feel himself to be one of the apostles of human freedom — which in this century meant, above all, economic freedom. Margaret had not seen eye to eye with him on this point; she had felt indifferent and the indifference had now been shown (as he had always half dreaded) to cloak a kind of native hostility. Very well — but what had he done? Spent hours writing a bad poem, and more hours talking to complacent idiots like Trumpett — perhaps introduced a few fresh people to the ideas that had taken hold of him so strongly. And this was what he had been dignifying with the grandiose title of a 'conflict between social and domestic obligations!'

If, now, he had been in a position where he could do something — then there might have been a clear issue: Which will you choose — wife or duty? But perhaps he was in that position, and it was his own weakness kept him inactive. A stronger man, for instance, would no doubt have done something with the information he had just got from Gerald. But what could he do with it? He thought of the kind of people he would have to talk to — to convince — people in whose presence he always felt crude and young and sentimental before he had even opened his mouth — who treated him with polite contempt. He simply had not the idiom for dealing with such people. And he knew it.

As it was, there was positively no such issue at all. He was an obscure curate — one of thousands — and would remain one. The rest — the idea that he was gallantly holding some post on behalf of humanity, a post which he must on no account desert — though Margaret was trying to get him to desert it — all this he had simply invented, God alone knew why.

With more and more terrible force the conviction came home to him that his whole life had been a kind of mistake. He had wrecked everything and achieved nothing. Your strength or weakness is part of your 'position' — that was what he had failed to see. And the result? With the strength of a pigmy, he had tried to do everything off his own bat. Every difficulty, every putting of the brake on by Margaret, every new hindrance, which had arisen naturally and inevitably out of his position in the world — a position which he occupied precisely because of his innate character and powers — all these he had heroically tackled one by one, as so many barbed wire entanglements cunningly placed by the powers of evil across the service he wished to render to humanity. He was not going to allow himself to be turned back! Oh no! They might impede his progress, the vindictive powers, they

might stop him altogether — so that all his energy was used up in cutting the barbed wire — he might have to spend his whole life paddling up stream at just the same pace as it flowed down, so that there was no progress at all! Still — he was not going to be turned aside from his chosen path — not he!

Barbed wire entanglements! And he had never seen that they were really signposts! Gentle, kindly signposts to indicate to himself what kind of a man he was, and what he could best do! Only, instead of reading the signposts, he had thought it was his duty to butt against them — and that was where, up to the present, practically all his energy had gone.

Before the end of the fortnight John had ceased to be conscious of anything much, except that he hated himself — and despised himself still more. The one consolation which supported him at all was a dim sense, which his very fatigue seemed to bring with it, of a certain inevitability in all that had happened. He had without cause incessantly bruised himself and others; he had turned his life into a single uninterrupted chain of efforts — only to find that those efforts were directed towards his own nullification. And yet — he did not see how it could have been otherwise. He had simply been that kind of man! If his life turned at every step into something more and more like a complete fiasco — well, then it must have been a fiasco that he was meant to live. You cannot after all, he thought, act wiser than you are; and this was not quite fatalism.

As to the future — he felt little confidence. All that he could do now was to try and save as much as possible out of the wreck which he himself had made. Perhaps it was too late to save anything: he must at any rate try. If there was one thing certain, it was that.

Margaret stayed in town all the time with Susan Holmes. She walked about, did things in the house while Susan was out at work, talked to her when she came in (but never about these troubles), sometimes went to theatres and concerts. And all the time her whole being seemed to be at a kind of standstill. She had not the heart to think of the past and dared not look into the future. Once indeed she did try and work out what her next steps must be, if she and John were henceforth to live separately. But the mere thought of the first step of all — that of letting other people know — was so intolerable to contemplate, that she let it drop and for the rest of the time just drifted on. What she would do at the end of this fortnight in town she had not the faintest idea.

And then, in the middle of the second week, a letter came from John. He said nothing about their quarrel, only that he had not had a holiday for a long time and could easily get one. He suggested they should go away to Italy together for a month and have a good rest 'before they decided anything.' If she agreed he would come up to town at once and they could go straight on. Let her write and tell him what to bring, giving him any necessary instructions about shutting up the house.

For an instant, as she put this letter down, Margaret forgot all that had happened and simply felt that everything had already come right and she and John were off for a holiday together. Then, however, present reality came crushing back, and she lost most of her enthusiasm. Nevertheless she was immensely relieved to have some suggestion to fall in with — even though she could see nothing definite

beyond it. So she wrote and thanked John for the suggestion, saying she thought it was a good one, and telling him what to do about the house.

CHAPTER LIX

Five days later Lady Hudson and Humphrey Trinder saw them off from Victoria Station, on route for Luci, whither Janet had already returned, to look after Dodge's villa. She had been asked to find them some rooms and had telegraphed her success. Immediately afterwards Humphrey returned home and settled down to the morning's work. His medical examinations were drawing near, and he could not afford to lose any time.

Gerald, who was again staying with him, was of course at his office. Humphrey and he had not seen a great deal of one another since his arrival this time; for, while Gerald was at work all day, it quite often happened that Humphrey himself had to be out in the evening. There were other respects too, in which, while their friendship remained undiminished, they harmonised less perfectly than before. In many ways indeed there could hardly have been two men more widely different in their state of mind and stage of development.

Humphrey had, in some way, found himself. He worked regularly and methodically, had something definite to do at nearly all hours of the day, and knew in general what he was aiming at. This made him less inclined either to invite or to bestow confidences of the personal sort — which was something of a disappointment to his visitor. For Gerald was in exactly the opposite case. His work at the office became every day more irksome to him, and the necessity, which he found, of deliberately assuming a rather smart and vulgar personality was either terribly wearing or — if he really threw himself into it — too easy. He could be cheap, if he chose — and it brought out the worst in him.

Then, when he came back again from his work to his own books and interests, it was often extremely difficult to take anything up at the point where he had left it off. He began to develop a sort of nibbling, dilettante attitude towards art and literature, which nobody — when he was clothed and in his right mind — scorned more than himself. Thus, by about a month after he left Klosters he had reached a condition of mind which tempted him very much to 'unload' to some extent on Humphrey. Lack of encouragement, however, induced him to refrain. And, in the act of thus controlling himself, he discovered how much he owed to the mere silent presence of his friend.

There were, moreover, several things — things lying in the nature of the malady itself — which helped to choke back the inclination towards confidence and appeals for advice. In the first place he had already spoken — perhaps too openly — about the worst trouble of all in the letter he wrote Humphrey a year ago. And there are certain appeals, S.O.S. messages, which, however pitiful, can only be sent out once. Gerald could remember, as a child, lying in bed afraid of the dark, and wondering if he should call out for his mother. You knew she would come, if you called, but you also knew that — eventually — she would have to go away again — and then everything would be as before — only with nothing now in reserve! You would be worse off than ever. Better not call at all, then! In this way — even at that

early age — he had discovered how in the long run every human being must face the darkness alone. Only he sometimes forgot it, and with Humphrey he had already, as the golfers say, taken his 'bisque.' On reflection, therefore, he realised that — quite apart from any discouragement — he ought to say no more of his obsessions and problems of will, problems which seemed at times as if they must eat the very kernel out of him, leaving nothing but a rotten crust. In any case it was more than doubtful if Humphrey would quite understand that growing distrust of his own — probably hereditary — puritanism, which had become such a big factor in Gerald's life. It looked silly enough when you brought it out into the light — whither Humphrey's incisive judgment no doubt would immediately bring it. If hereditary prejudices lead you to a good life, so much the better for hereditary prejudices! Quite so, but somehow, as soon as 'it' dropped back into the dark again, there it was as real and troublesome as ever. For what is the good life? That was the open question — to himself; but no longer, apparently, to Humphrey. With the latter it was evidently no longer a burning question (for, laugh as cleverly as you liked, it would go on burning) whether the ordinary restraints, on which so-called society is founded, are good in themselves or merely footling.

Humphrey, he felt, would always take it for granted that your will was 'right' and that you merely had difficulty in strengthening it. In reality that was the whole business. Your will knew nothing whatever of 'right' or 'wrong.' It worked one way one moment and another way another and between the two moments there seemed to be not the silkiest hair of a connection. It was your whole being — judgment, heart and all — complete with philosophical automatic-machine for delivering the ultimate nature of the Good, which swung to and fro in this disconcerting manner.

Out of this difficulty there opened another, which he also doubted if Humphrey would understand, but of which he would not in any case have dared to speak — for there are some parts of the self, to which the self as a whole shrinks from giving even as much body as it lent by words. He doubted if Humphrey knew at all the ecstatic, alluring thrill of giving way. You gave way to a temptation, not simply because you liked the thing you were tempted to — but because you liked the giving way itself! Something had hold of you — and you loved to be held!

This was a part of himself which Gerald had never imparted to anyone else at all, though it had been there — as the dimmest of shadows, indeed, and lurking far in the background — from nearly as early an age as he could remember. What else had induced the little boy to tie himself to the table-leg? And now this shadowy unself seemed to be getting greater force; often, as he looked round at the society in which — apart from his own immediate friends — he was placed — at the whole society of modern Europe, it would suddenly loom up within him, a horrible, iridescent spectre. And the spectre became more and more real, more and more clamorous, till, although he lost sight of it, he knew it was within call night and day. He would pick up some newly published book, some illustrated periodical, some newspaper article, would glance at it for a minute only, and yet, before he put it down again — there was the shadow at his side, beckoning, smiling, stretching out its arms lovingly.

Meanwhile, in his imagination there grew up a picture. It was this. A civilisation, or perhaps a nation, arises, lives out the vigour of its youthful days,

matures, passes into decline. In the end it will be called back again to the mother-darkness that gave it birth. In the end it will vanish. It will cease to be. And from the moment at which it passes the zenith of maturity, from that moment on its helpless puppets, the human souls which it has created, begin to hear the Call. At first they hear it only faintly in the distance. It is obscure, it is hard to follow, it is disguised in the myriad forms which we call 'decadence' — but always it is quietly insistent; it will never be still, until it has had its way; it will never cease until everything else had ceased. It calls us back, this gentle voice, to the oldest darkness of all, back to the Mothers, back to the million pleasures of the womb. And we, since we were created by the voice, can never in our deepest souls of all, rebel against it. If we seem to protest it is in fact, although we know it not, only in order to enhance the subsequent delight of surrender, the ecstatic thrill of submitting our own will to its. We build up a something, a morality, a strong will, a twinkling vigour of masculine intellect — yes, but only in order to sacrifice them all at last on the ancient matriarchal altar. For the nobler the imagined goods which we have built up in opposition, the higher will the lustful flames of the sacrificial fire lead to the midnight sky in the latter days. And it was to this sole end, oh Man, that thou ever becamest noble!

For this sacrifice — when we pull down our highest and trample on it, when we give back all that we have won to the darkness from which we won it — this is the most glorious moment, the highest most unmanly pleasure that we can ever know. Indeed, it is the only Pleasure, and all other seeming pleasures are but its shadows and pale reflections. We are called back. And we love that we should be called back — how else? Was it not thence we came? Heaven! with what a shudder, with what a long drawn sigh of torturing bliss shall we be drawn at last into the yawning mouth of that Night! But long before our time comes, we are given, to console us, and to help us support the delay, pictures, symbols, yes, even we become the symbol to one another! And then it is that those who have grown a little more awake out of the dream, and into the symbol, that these become conscious of the symbol, and begin to speak of it, calling it 'Romance,' calling it 'Sex.'

Sometimes it seemed to Gerald that the very fact of his being so fully conscious of all this train of ideas must protect him from their influence; but then, five minutes later, it would appear equally true, nay, far more true, that the being conscious must only operate by raising the pleasure to its most exquisite point. After all, no one truly enjoys giving up, save him who knows how much he is giving. It was the emperor who had himself seen something of the organisation of his provinces, who realised the untiring labour, the starvations and martyrdoms, the austere and life-long sacrifice of generations of public-spirited men, on which his empire was built, it was this emperor alone who could fully taste the bliss of slipping off his crown and slipping on his mistress's garter.

Gerald made an attempt at this time to seek refuge again in that garden of medieval literature, which had once, with its tender atmosphere of devotion all wrought into rich form and interwoven with romance, brought him such keen delight. But it was no use. When it is strong enough, we only find, everywhere we look, just what fits our mood. It was a different Middle Age, a different Dark Age, to which he now returned. Thus, following up some reference or other, he was led to

read for the first time in his life a great deal of that latest Latin poetry, into which the medieval metres and the medieval mood have only just begun to creep. He got hold of a collection of those sporadic, sensuous love-lyrics of the age before Ovid was canonised, and found his way at last back to that hot-house bloom of Rome's amorous decline, the Pervigilium Veneris.

There is in these old Latin 'fourteeners' an almost terrible majesty. They march: they march irresistibly forward as with the boots of unnumbered legionaries on unnumbered roads. On one day in particular the incessant and intense refrain of the Pervigilium Veneris seemed to have taken hold of Gerald's entire being. Its throbbing fall was the throbbing of his own blood, and far on into the night, as if he were a condemned prisoner, listening to the workmen busy at his scaffold, the inevitable tramping march of its feet kept hammering home into his splitting temples the inexorableness of its message. Of what use to resist?

Cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras amet. He will love tomorrow, who has never loved, and he who has loved will love to-morrow. Of what use to resist?

Cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras amet.

Cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras amet. Who set you (cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras amet) to bear up against the intolerable weight of all Christian Europe hurrying to its decline? Who is the happy warrior — if not he, who honestly accepts the destiny of his age, the ruling of the historical spirit which brought him to birth in this Continent, at this day, and who rides gracefully to peace upon its ebbing waves? Why, the world is full of such happy warriors! Why, whole nations have gladly accepted the situation! And their peoples are the happier and politer, and better bred because of it.

Oh, blessed innocent little Gerald Marston so well brought up — Pan knoweth the remedy for those splitting temples, Pan who taught the shepherds on their hills, Pan who whispered it to the naughty clerks in their monasteries, so that they did first and bubbled into verse about it afterwards!

Post blanda Veneris
Commercia
Lassatur cerebri
Substantia.

Yes, it is the same majestic inevitable march — inevitable as the progress of time itself — the deep-toned voice of the oracle with one last word to utter before it falls dumb for ever! Cherchez la femme! And Gerald recollected, as the trite old phrase came to him, the 'decadent' French writers whom he had once stigmatized as 'feeble-minded.' He knew now that it was fear, not judgment, which had made him fling that insult. There was nothing feeble-minded about him, nor 'decadent' about his people. On the contrary: They alone were wise. They alone were wise — this nation of lotus-eaters for ever hurrying to seed between the nearest pair of breasts. Cherchez la femme! Yes, and it is time for thee, too, Gerald Marston! Thou too shalt rest. But where?

At this stage of his career Gerald had almost forgotten that he himself had ever had literary aspirations. Accordingly when the next morning he received a letter from someone who described himself as the editor of a new monthly periodical, shortly to appear, and asked him to send in a specimen of dramatic criticism, it was like a breath of his forgotten youth. A ticket was enclosed for a play that had already been running for some weeks, and the writer gave him to understand that his criticism would in all probability not be published. It was a test. He merely wanted a sample of Mr. Marston's work, with a view to future engagements, should he find it suitable.

Gerald had always had a fancy for dramatic criticism, though he had never been able to get any. He was excited at the idea, therefore, and went off with his Stall ticket after supper that evening, having completely forgotten for the time being the exalted cosmic reflections of the previous night. The only trace of them that remained was a pronounced physical fatigue.

But this, too, he soon forgot. The atmosphere of the theatre never failed to thrill him, and the first striking up of the orchestra — while people were still finding their way into their seats — no matter what jumpy little tune it might be playing — always gave him a faintly wicked sensation. To-night, it is true, his spirits were slightly damped by finding the house nearly empty. He had arrived some time before the curtain went up and found practically no one else in the house except a group of dinner-jacketed young men in the stalls, who seemed to know one another, though they were dotted about in different places. Until the curtain went up, these young men talked incessantly in loud and laughing voices which rang hollowly through the empty auditorium. Gerald wondered for a moment if they were critics like himself, but then he remembered how long the play had been running and realised that this was most unlikely. He ended by diagnosing 'paper'. Whatever the cause, the emptiness of the house together with the clear voices of the talkative young men imparted an air of unreality to the proceedings.

Very soon after the play began, Gerald began to understand why the house was empty. It was one of Arthur Moulton's few complete failures — dreary drawing-room stuff, grimly determined to be 'modern' at all costs and unleavened by any comedy. The world it portrayed was that conventional world of the stage in which nothing is of substantial importance except the pairing arrangements of human beings, and in which, when these go wrong, there is nothing (pause) left. By the end of the First Act, therefore, Gerald's spirits were definitely drooping; a painful reaction had set in from the mood of adventure in which he had set out from home. After all, it was nothing. Nothing would happen! He felt savagely annoyed when, just after the curtain rose on the Second Act, a little paper pellet struck him on the side of the head. One of these infernally complacent young men! At the same time it did not improve his temper, when he thought he heard a woman's laugh from one of the boxes.

The play grew steadily drearier and drearier. When the curtain fell at the end of the Second Act, Gerald began to wonder if he need sit it all out. He stared moodily down at the red plush carpet and was just thinking of taking a stroll when, to his intense annoyance, another pellet hit him, this time on the right ear. He was just about to look up with an angry face, to see who had been so dashed impertinent,

when he recollected, as he usually did on such occasions, that the business of meeting the impertinent person's eyes and staring them out — or, worse still, rebuking him — would certainly be far more painful than the insult. So he continued, instead, looking down at the floor, where the last missile was still lying at his feet, with a face as red as the carpet on which it lay. He noticed that the paper was twisted in a peculiar way — almost as if it were a note — and, becoming interested, picked it up from the ground and untwisted it. On the inside, written in pencil, were the four words: "in box No. 2."

From the moment Gerald read those four words, his heart began thumping in an uncomfortable way against his ribs. Without looking up, he at once began hurriedly and anxiously thinking. At last he rose from his place and, without turning his eyes towards the only occupied box, made his way out into the Foyer. It did not take him long to find the box. He knocked on the door and was bidden to enter.

"Excuse me!" he said bashfully to the lady who occupied the box alone, "did you accidentally drop this into the stalls?"

"Yes. I dropped it. Please come in!"

Gerald hardly noticed her face; he only noticed her silk fichu and a faint aroma of carnations. He no longer had the slightest doubt that she was the lady who had laughed when the first pellet struck him, or that she was still laughing at him. Yet this did not trouble him at all — rather the reverse.

"Do tell me if you like the play," she said. "You didn't look as if you did at all from up here."

"I think it's the most awful nonsense I ever saw," he said truthfully. She laughed.

"I'm so glad. I'm so tired of it, I really don't feel I can stay till the end."

"I —" he began, "I'm not staying either —" he paused — "in that case!" he finished, amazed at his own finesse.

"Will you take me home?" said the lady impulsively. "Everything is so extraordinarily dull." Gerald caught hold of himself. His one anxiety now was, lest he should say or do anything *gauche*.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," he exclaimed with light sympathy: "Do you think you could manage to live through another three minutes, while I get a taxi?" She answered him with a pleased, bright-eyed nod. He hurried away.

Two hours later, after one of the most appetizing dinners it had ever been his lot to taste, he was lying on the floor of her drawing-room with his head in her lap, and his heart thumping as hard as ever against his ribs. She had made a cup of her hands and was holding his chin in them.

"What would you like most of all in the world, I wonder?" she asked. At first he did not answer. Then he sighed and closed his eyes and whispered something very low, which she did not hear. She leant nearer to him, so that he was lost in the shadow of her face:

"What was it?"

"Make me — do — the opposite of what I will!" he murmured.

"What do you will?" she asked after a little while, in the same tone. He could hardly speak.

“Not — not to sink into you.” She bent still lower and at the same time drew his head up till it touched her breasts. After a while she let him go again.

“Carry me upstairs,” she whispered — but commandingly. And he rose at once and obeyed.

A quarter of an hour later: “I do believe,” she said to him, careful to keep the contempt out of her voice, “you would like to be my lady’s maid!” He protested that he was not worthy. Besides — a lady’s maid — swooning! How would she ever have patience? She bent down and whispered something to him.

“That is enough now!” she said at last. She rose from her chair and went to the door. “You will be ready!” she said to him with a smile and went out.

He made himself ready and then began with a sort of holy awe to smooth and fold some of her clothes, as she had told him. As he was doing so, he noticed two initials beautifully sewn into one of them in silk, an A. and a C. Suddenly the miserable wretch stood transfixed, realising beyond all shadow of a doubt what those letters must stand for. As he stood plunged in memory, the huge delicious cloud of evil, in which he was enveloped, wavered, eddied, collapsed inward from all sides into — into a woman, a person, a self-satisfied affected young female, whom he already knew inside out, who had yet been thought good enough to substitute her smug small-talk on Carlyle for an article which it had taken him months to prepare! He thought again of all he had felt and said in the last hour, he, one ordinary human being, to her, another. Oh God in Heaven! How should he go on living?

Gerald started violently, as the door opened, and Adela Cranage swept back into the room, radiant in a garment of transparent gold. He stared at her. Everything swam. The scales of his whole being rushed up and down and again up and down, from top to bottom, like searchlights crossing a nocturnal sky, and yet hardly an instant had elapsed before the pan of contempt kicked the beam and the pan of worship sank like lead to the very foundations of his soul. Oh glorious glorious creature! The delicious cloud was about him again with all the magic suddenness of the Arabian Genii loosed from its bottle. He gazed and gazed at her, for ever putting off for one more instant the infinite luxury of falling prostrate at her superb arched feet.

At all costs he must keep the spoiling thoughts from creeping back. He must keep them back — down, right down — that everlasting weaving traffic of thoughts that had spoilt his whole life. He must stop them — stop the traffic . . . Stop . . . ‘Wup!’ It was the faintest echo of Humphrey’s voice, but with it there stood out before his vision in a sudden and blinding clarity the jagged blue vein which sometimes showed on the latter’s forehead. It seemed to enter into him, to pass right through him, as though it were a streak of forked lightning. At the same instant — the experience was too intense, too inward to partake of the nature of hallucination — the golden cloud of power and glory in which she stood enveloped, and before which he had burned like vitriol to prostrate himself, seemed to lift itself from her and vanish — to lift away and vanish, passing over into — himself!

It was true. All that to which he had been longing to offer himself up — he himself was all that! Gerald almost tottered. For the second time the Genii shrank back into its bottle, and he stood facing, with a sort of tender pity, a silly dressed-up

girl. It was more now as if he were being obliged to watch his own daughter make, as she grew up, a foreseeable, but none the less embarrassing, *faux pas*.

Well, shall I go? he thought to himself; and then: My word, won't she be furious — what larks!

He had plenty of time to deliberate; for he could tell from her expression how well prepared she had come to let him gaze his fill. I can go, if I like! he thought, that's definite. And then: If I do, in a week's time I shall be distrusting myself again — thinking it was infernal good-dog Puritanism! Damn! I'm not going!

He had taken his choice.

With a curious subtle smile playing like the very faintest breath of wind about his closed lips he deliberately allowed the ruthless, hungry, commanding will, that alien Will, before which he had just now been so filthily grovelling to leap up in his own flaming limbs. He moved towards her, giving her back from radiant smile and out-stretched arms her share of the golden cloud which he had so lately filched from her. And indeed he did all that it had been intended he should do — only after a decidedly different fashion from anything which his behaviour during the last three hours could have led her to imagine.

CHAPTER LX

He wanted her to marry him. Whatever she had been or might be (and he suspected that professional jealousy had considerably affected his previous estimate of her character), he could not help believing that it must all melt in the generous blaze of his own passion. Eventually, without too much reluctance, she consented to try a kind of engagement.

Difficulties began almost immediately. Gerald had of course no doubt at all that Adela must have had other lovers. He was inclined to suspect, however, that a good deal too much is generally made of such matters, and he had prepared himself with equanimity for the revelations which must transpire in the course of their acquaintance. Yet when it came to the point, he found he had underrated the force and anguish of that most unlovely of all the passions — jealousy. She said she had given, or would give them up, and he believed her. She wanted nevertheless to remain on ordinarily friendly terms with them, and he could only approve. Yet each new discovery seemed to send him down into a little hell where, as long as it lasted, no amount of reasoning had the smallest effect in mitigating his torments. The discovery, soon after her consent, that Humphrey himself had been among her number was for some reason the worst of all.

Even so, this jealousy of her past would never have been enough in itself to destroy his determination for a lasting union. The pangs were sharp while they lasted; and of all the passions which he had known they came the nearest to physical pain, in that they kept him awake even when he was tired. But once they were over (and they did not after all last so very long) he was free. And then he could embrace the object, and meet the cause, of them without bearing either any further ill will. Far worse, far more hopeless, was the gradual reluctant discovery that Adela herself had nothing in her that really responded to his own emotion. It was always the little

things that revealed this to him, the chance work, the delicate intonation, all the more heart-breaking because it was, outwardly, too slight to mention.

Especially sometimes, when they had sat silent together for a long while, until he felt as if translated to a different world — a world where entities liquefy and interpenetrate one another and yet remain themselves — especially at such times would these chance remarks or impatiences of hers suddenly reveal to him that in fact he had all the time been as much alone as ever. And then, because the depth of the illusion seemed incredible, the jesting deception of the gods too grossly cruel to be true, then, as he suddenly chewed again the bitter ashes of reality, the shock would sometimes threaten to break down almost physically. He would tremble inwardly like a sufferer from shell-shock, as he felt the hopeless disharmony between his own vibrations and hers.

Even before a fortnight was out he was forced to recognise these jerky unparadisings as a permanent alloy in the gold of his great new hope. And, in doing so, he found himself falling back on a certain fundamental attitude of resignation, which had steadily grown in him in the course of the last year, a sort of inner conviction that anything that went amiss with his fortunes was after all probably in some way his own fault. In this case he recalled how he had always, all his life long, been wrapped up like a silk worm in a subtly isolating cocoon of his own feelings and dreams. He had always been, and he knew it, at rock bottom, the most delicate of egotists. Why then should he expect everything to be suddenly made smooth for him? He was railing at the gods, but what had they done after all except bring home to him the truth of what he was already? The end of such reflections as these was generally a more vigorous determination than ever to stick to Adela, at all costs. She was at least there. She was an objective second person, and his relation to her was really a relation and not a dream. If she should often fail to make him happy with the deepest love and understanding, well, that only reminded him — with a stab of pain which had also, it must be admitted, a tang of invigorating pleasure in it — that he himself had always gone about looking for love and understanding, instead of for — people! Her otherness, in fact, was precisely the more real to him, the less she coincided with his love's young dream. It was at this period of his life that Gerald first perceived, or thought he perceived, the rationale of the institution called Marriage. And it was no fear of further disillusionment, which finally prevented him from putting his theories to the test, but something quite different.

One morning, about a month after his faithful visit to the theatre, he received a letter from John in acknowledgment of the one he had written describing his experiences at Klosters. John wrote, from Italy, at considerable length, giving some account of his domestic difficulties, but finally expressing his firm conviction that what Gerald had overheard in the library was of the first significance, and even warning him to look out for himself. "Some people," he wrote, "may think you know too much!" The letter took Gerald's mind vividly back to those few days at Klosters. How infinitely distant they seemed! He found himself comparing the admiration he had felt for Margaret with that which he now felt for Adela. There seemed to be no relation whatever between the two.

That evening, when he was with her, something occurred in their conversation to remind him again that Arthur Moulton had been at one time her

lover. Moulton's being at Klosters, his being the owner of the theatre in which she had seduced him, the Encyclopedia article, Bilbury's odd letter, the fact that he had never heard any more of the critique which he had sent in — all these things leaped together in his mind and exploded instantaneously into — suspicion.

Possibly, if the memory of those days with Margaret had not been so fresh in his mind just at that moment, he would not have done what he did. As it was, he asked Adela flatly there and then, if she had not been requested by someone to decoy him. She laughed; and only when he pressed her so hard as to leave no doubt of his being in deadly earnest, did she deny the suggestion vigorously and entirely.

But, when Gerald left her that night (for he still slept for the most part with Humphrey) he found himself still thinking the suggestion might be true. That was the trouble. Had she openly admitted it to be true, they might perhaps have come to an understanding. Her denial (whether it were actually true or not) revealed to him for the first time the fact that he could not trust her word. And whatever the rationale of marriage may be, he thought desperately, this is an impossible foundation to build on. Two days later he had finally broken off the ill-starred engagement.

CHAPTER LXI

Gerald went home and told Humphrey that it was all over. The same evening he broached his suspicions of Adela, half expecting to be laughed at, since he knew that Humphrey had never been much impressed with his brother's economic and social theories. But in conversation which followed it turned out that on the subject of 'secret control' at any rate, Humphrey was rather beginning to come round to John's ideas.

What looked like convincing him was, so Gerald learnt, the extraordinary, senseless opposition which really new conceptions of any kind met with in the medical world. He could no longer, he told Gerald, believe that mere mental inertia — or even those active spiritual forces which he now assumed — were enough in themselves to explain either the boycotting of those ideas which he himself conceived to be sound, or the unconscionable boosting of others which he regarded as especially mischievous.

"I remember," said Gerald, commenting on a long explanation to this effect, "you always thought the doctors were asses. But I thought it was more because of the nonsense they occasionally talk about germs — not because they won't look at new ideas. As far as I can see there nearly always is some new medical stunt on. They all seem only too ready to rush after the latest thing — once it becomes scientifically respectable. Look at this new craze for sun-cures, for instance. Twenty years ago we never heard of them."

"Oh yes," said Humphrey. "There's plenty of rushing after new ideas — of a certain sort."

"What sort?"

"Purely materialistic."

"Oh, I see. Your trouble is that they won't take up spiritual science."

“Not simply that they won’t take it up, but that they are turned out in some way by — whatever turns them out — so that their minds become absolutely incapable of functioning when they are presented with the idea of such a thing. Most of my medical friends regard me simply as a more or less harmless lunatic.”

“I see,” said Gerald. And, in spite of the upheaval through which he was passing, he could not forbear adding: “I — er — I have a certain sympathy with them!” Humphrey smiled and began to talk about sun-treatment.

About a month later Humphrey received a letter from John, in which he explained that he and Margaret intended prolonging their stay in Italy. He wrote in extremely good spirits. The change had evidently worked wonders with Margaret, and — reading between the lines — with himself too. He actually spoke of getting a chaplaincy out there, if it could be managed. ‘It will cut me up a bit,’ he wrote, ‘giving up the work in Loomfield, but still, there is work to be done everywhere, as no one knows better than you. Margaret herself is working hard and regularly at her painting. Just now she is on a big landscape — the view from a perfectly marvellous spot just near here. She goes off every morning at the same time, with her palette and satchel, and sometimes I go with her. The light is absolutely amazing — it simply drenches you!’

I am playing with the idea of trying a history of Ecclesiastical Art. Do you think I ought to? There are so many things one might do. This would be an ideal place to do it in, absolutely quiet, with Naples at hand and Rome not too far off for an occasional visit. Of course we should be a bit cut off; but then there seems no prospect of Janet leaving the villa just yet, and we all get on so well together. Moreover I get access to the Villa library — an unusually complete affair collected by an old Italian nobleman. As a matter of fact there is a small colony of English people dotted about in the neighbouring villas and, of course, any amount in Rome. A curious lot — they seem to float about in a detached sort of way. Rather selfish most of them, but often amusing.

(Interruption for lunch). Margaret came in with her picture. It is nearly finished. She really has got a wonderfully delicate sense of colour — even I can see it. And she seems to be getting a curious brilliancy into this particular picture that almost frightens me. She has got hold of some old tome from the library — about a hundred years earlier than da Vinci’s notebooks, I should think — and has been mugging it up no end. I don’t know if anyone else knows of it — and we are not in too much of a hurry to enquire, until she has worked over it a little herself. Suppose we re-discovered the secrets of the Old Masters! “That’s the stuff!”

All right! Grin away! But she is fearfully excited about it — and so am I. I don’t see why she shouldn’t do something of the kind. She really is an astonishing person — much more so than even I ever thoughts. I wish you could come out — and Gerald, too. But perhaps you will, when the exams are done. You will have to come soon, though, or you won’t know either of us.

With love from both of us to both of you.

Your affectionate bros.

John.

When Gerald came in that evening, Humphrey read most of this letter aloud to him. As they sat discussing it afterwards, they heard a double knock at the door. Humphrey went out of the room and came back with a yellow envelope in his hand, a foreign telegram, which he slit open and, without speaking, when he had read it, he handed in on to Gerald.

Bad accident can you come by Wednesday advise.

John.

Humphrey slapped the envelope on to his knee, wrote across the back of it

Coming instanter.

Humphrey.

and handed it to the boy with half-a-crown.

“You’re going?” said Gerald, as he came back. Humphrey nodded.

“Your exam!”

“Blast my exam!”

Ten minutes later Humphrey telephoned to Klosters, and discovered that Sir Otto, who was in town with Lady Hudson, had just received a similar telegram with very little further information except that a surgical operation on Margaret might prove to be necessary during the next few days, and the surprising addition: “Bring Merlin.” He had already telephoned to Klosters for Merlin to be brought up to town, and Lady Hudson was to fly over with the cat next morning. He (Sir Otto) was going by train, arriving at Luci in the small hours of Wednesday morning, and he suggested that Humphrey should accompany him. They arranged to meet at Victoria.

CHAPTER LXII

The next morning Gerald, who had seen the two of them off from Victoria Station, felt very forlorn indeed, as he walked off the empty platform and made his way to the office. He had never altogether lost his sense of a kind of support in Humphrey, and the sudden tearing away of that support at just the present moment meant a good deal to him. It meant all sorts of troubles difficult to explain, but also one very simple and easy to explain — so simple that he would never have dared mention it to anyone. He was afraid of sleeping in the flat alone! Those night-terrors, which he had so incessantly suffered as a child and from which he had never, like other grown-up people, wholly freed himself, had of late been troubling him again. Still, it had to be faced, and he congratulated himself that, owing to the time of year, the period of darkness was still fairly short.

Beyond and above this, the aftermath of his affair with Adela Cranage was giving him a very bad time. The worst feature of it was the perpetual grinding obsession that, in spite of everything, by giving her up, he had lost something of

enormous value. What this something was he could not very well put into words. It certainly was not herself. It was something she had given him — a sort of insolent confidence and courage it seemed to be at one time; at another time a kind of light. The light was something which irradiated the whole face of nature, sparked out of his eyes, and shone back to him again from everything — even from the most ordinary human beings with whom he had to deal! Did he seek in his memory for its original source, it appeared always to be streaming out from that moment when she had reappeared to him in the doorway of her room.

And this mysterious reassuring, joy-creating light was now gradually fading away. It did not leave him immediately. Indeed, the day after he broke off their engagement, it seemed to be brighter and clearer than ever. But as the time went on, there could be no doubt that it was fading steadily out of his life, leaving him the same awkward, timid, comparatively useless person as before. His work, which had benefited immediately by its presence, began to suffer correspondingly by its absence; and indeed his whole being seemed to have been hoisted high and dry, like a vessel stranded on a submerged rock, and split apart into jarring sections. On the one side, physical greed spoke louder than ever in his blood, while on the other, sat cold reason condemning it more from force of habit than conviction. Lost between the two, he was unable to find either beauty or significance in anything he felt.

Gerald might have been able to accept this as inevitable, but for the fact that he could remember one or two times in his life when he had not been split up in this disabling manner, when the whole man, intellect, emotion and will had moved as one. It had been so when he was a boy, it had been so when he was first in love; it had been so during those few rare days at Klosters. On this last occasion, too, there had been a light — a different, more tranquilly golden light than that which he had just lost — but different in quality, rather than in kind. He recollected the wonderful day with Margaret, lying in the churchyard looking up at the sunlit tower. Could it really be true that this precious unity, which turned him at once from a walking disease into a musical and loving human being — that it had been based each time on illusion?

What troubled him most deeply of all was the secret conviction that he could, if he chose, recover this inspiring light — to-morrow. He knew very well that, out of the playful generous warmth of his passion, he had given Adela as much, if not more pleasure than any of her other lovers, and that she would gladly have him again to-morrow — on her own terms. He had only to go back to her. He would not get everything he wanted, but he would undoubtedly get this mysterious light and the boldness and happy confidence, which it brought — of which it sometimes seemed positively to consist. Yet he could not quite make up his mind to go back. For there was another voice — coming from God knew what other truncated fragment of his dismembered self — which assured him sternly that by doing so he must necessarily expose himself to the most terrible danger — a danger far, far greater now than any that he had courted in his original abject attempt to annihilate himself into her. But what was he to do? It was the old problem of Philip drunk or Philip sober.

Indeed, indeed repentance oft before

I swore — but was I sober when I swore?

At one moment this latter voice would sound like the stentorian, though distant utterance of his own well-nigh smothered person — at another like an echo of childish superstition or monkish fears. In the end he would almost certainly have gone back to her, had not the reassuring memory continually recurred to him of the choice he had made that night, and of the mood in which he had made it, reminding him that, whatever restrained him, it was certainly no longer the fear of her.

As it was, Gerald remained for days in a state of complete spiritual inanition, only disliking and despising himself more and more with every sunrise. The shameful memory of his perversion was always at hand to torment him, and many times he felt as if he could sit down and cry for sheer weakness. Meanwhile detached memories and ideas of all descriptions hovered and circled at every idle moment through the hungry emptiness within, bringing nothing with them and taking nothing away — like the chimeras begotten by the guilty Ixion, who, having attempted Juno's person and succeeded instead in ravishing a cloud, was rolled for punishment ceaselessly on a wheel in empty air.

On one of these idle occasions there recurred to him the memory of John's odd phrase about 'the Sun getting out,' and on top of that the enigmatic 'freedom to love' in his letter to Klosters. These two expressions danced about with one another in Gerald's brain, linked hands, kissed, bowed, quarrelled, and made it up again, entirely without reference to himself — so it seemed — till he loathed both of them. Especially as he could not determine what either of them meant! The second might easily mean in its context that most people are only kept from promiscuity by the pressure of economic necessity! Very well, suppose it did. One used words like 'promiscuity', but if promiscuity meant getting back some of that joyous self-reliance, then promiscuity was a good thing. Perhaps that would be exactly what would happen, when 'the Sun got out' perhaps . . . perhaps . . . hands across, lead up the centre, cast off, set to partners, and the grand chain . . .

Two days after Humphrey's departure, on his way home from work, Gerald happened to see on a bookstall a photographic illustration — all smiles and nudity — of some people taking sun-treatment in Switzerland. It recalled to him instantly his conversation on the subject with Humphrey, who had insisted that this over-indulgence in the direct unbroken rays of the physical sun was bad, because it weakened the activity of that spiritual, or inner, sun, which was — everything. Gerald had of course read enough Brockmann to know what Humphrey meant; but the expression seemed to mean much more to him, now, in recollection, than it had done at the time. It took him back to that old piece of advice which Humphrey had given him a year ago — to read some Novalis. The advice seemed somehow to be made more impressive by Humphrey's personal absence, and Gerald felt an impulse to follow it, strong and lasting enough, for a wonder, to take him along to a second-hand bookshop and induce him to buy a copy of the German poet's works.

After supper he opened the little volume at the Hymns to the Night and began straight away to read. It meant a good deal of laborious dictionary-work; for although he might know a few well-known lyrics by heart, his acquaintance with the language as a whole was not deep. Before he had finished the first paragraph,

however, Gerald had already ceased to grudge any particle of that work. It was hardly like reading. As he worked slowly on, a kind of twilight seemed to rise up from the printed page, and be all about him. And far into the night he pored on, allowing, with the intentness of a thirsty man drinking, drinking, drinking, that holy twilight to rise up and embosom his garish disintegration and self-hatred. Until he had drunk the last drop, absorbed the very last sentences, he would hardly even raise his head from the book. And then, when he did at last close it and sat dreaming on in his chair, there came into his face a sort of incredulous shyness, and into his heart a fearful anxiety not to pretend that more had happened than was really the case. He wondered if the Ugly Duckling had felt at all like this.