NO WALLS OF JASPER

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The Misty Valley
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The Simple Pass On

NO WALLS OF JASPER

By

Joanna Cannan

" . . . for whom there are no walls of jasper,
no gates in heaven . . . "

Humbert Wolfe

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To
GEORGETTE HEYER

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CHAPTER I

SWEET SPRING

"WHAT'S the time?"

"I told you only five minutes ago," said Julian Prebble, glancing casually at his wrist-watch. "A quarter to seven. It was exactly twenty minutes to seven when you asked me before."

"A quarter to seven," repeated George Wellesley Prebble in his high, old voice. "A quarter to seven." Immediately he forgot it. Well, he thought, that doesn't matter. As soon as Julian's finished talking, I'll ask him again. He didn't mind asking Julian, because he didn't care a curse what Julian thought of him; only when Eric was with him did he torture himself to control what he knew to be plain evidence of the confusion in his softening brain. He didn't want Eric to see that he was getting old and idiotic. Eric was idle, worthless, extravagant, and a bastard at that: Julian was industrious, honourable and his legitimate son and heir; but, by the same token, Eric was the issue of his life as he had lived it with a certain sort of beauty, a certain sort of nobility, in the happy, little, pink, and white flat in Maida Vale, while Julian was the issue of his life as he had lived

it meanly, drably, hatefully, at The Elms. Ironically enough, it was Eric who would have been patient with him, who would have answered him without Julian's " I've just told you," or Miss James's " Tch, tch, Mr. Prebble, the time again ! " for Eric was kind, as interminably and invariably kind as his mother had been in the days before the almond tree had flourished and the grasshopper had become a burden and desire had failed . . .

Julian was talking about his children. " John's doing splendidly at school," he said. " Second in the term's arithmetic again, and he's nine months under the average age for the form. He's got the Prebble brains." If only I could interest Father in the boys, he thought, he might do something. Most old men fancy themselves as progenitors of a family. I'll speak plainer. " School fees are appalling nowadays." he said, looking worried. " But certainly a decent education wouldn't be wasted on John."

" What's the time ? " said George Wellesley Prebble.

Julian's open hand smote his knee. He gesticulated more than the average Englishman, a habit which contrasted oddly with his slow way of speaking and heavy build.

" Why on earth don't you have the clock in the room, Father ? You'd know the time then, without having to ask anyone. Shall I call in at Cathcart's on the way home and tell them to send up a couple of men to move it ? "

" Certainly not. That clock was a wedding

present to your dear mother. It was placed in the hall of this house in eighteen-eighty-seven. I'm not going to have it moved now."

"Well, there are other clocks to be had . . . "

"And I don't want them, thank you. Why don't you mind your own business and let me alone?"

"I was only thinking of your comfort, Father," said Julian, intimidated. "As a matter of fact, it's ten minutes to seven, and I must be getting along. Dinner's at seven. We've only the morning-girl now."

"All right, go along," said George Prebble, with a grin that revealed an old-fashioned, ill-fitting denture. He was by no means independent of the morals of his generation and class; but, nevertheless, he despised Julian because he was going home at seven to his wife.

"I'll look in to-morrow," said Julian. "Good-night, Father." He rose to his feet, glad to get out of the morning-room, overheated as it was, on that muggy spring evening, by the soporific warmth of its slow coal fire. The hall, with its hermetically sealed stained glass window and its smell of pitchpine and boiled cabbage, was more bearable, and he stood there for a moment, drawing in a breath of the colder air. Then he walked to the drawing-room door, calling out softly, "Miss James!"

"I am here, Mr. Julian," said a duteous voice within.

The drawing-room at The Elms was a fine, large

room. It boasted two fireplaces of white marble, and four French windows, which opened on an iron verandah, shaded by a pale green, iron canopy. There was no fire in either of the grates to-night ; oriental carved firescreens stood before them, brown holland dustsheets shrouded the chairs and sofas, and a drugget was spread over two-thirds of the carpet. Miss James was sitting on the edge of a small, upright chair which she had uncovered, and, as Julian came in, she rose quickly, dropping a tangle of grey silk knitting in her nervous haste. Julian noticed that ; but he did not pick up the knitting. Here was no Beaconsfield. He put his hands in his pockets and said, " My father seems much the same to-night, Miss James."

Miss James picked up her knitting and said, " Yes, Mr. Julian, he's really wonderful," with a brightness which was utterly and rather horribly foreign to the faded despondency of her face. She was not feeling bright. She was feeling hopeless, helpless, wretchedly ill, bitterly cold, lonely and excruciatingly bored ; but, " *I am the daughter of a professional man and of a bright disposition,*" she had written to Julian three years ago, and she was paid fifty pounds a year to be bright, and bright she must be. Julian was not paid to be bright, so he was able to sigh as he said, " Yes, wonderful." " Doctor was so pleased with him," Miss James went on, even more brightly. " He thought him such a good colour when he came in yesterday. In fact, he said to Mr. Prebble, ' Mr. Prebble, you'll outlast us all.' Mr. Prebble was delighted. I gave

him a little roast chicken for his dinner, and he came back twice."

" That's splendid," said Julian. " Well, I must be getting on, Miss James. Warm, isn't it ? Everything else all right ? "

" Quite all right at present, Mr. Julian."

" Mr. Eric been down lately ? "

" Yesterday. He was here when Doctor came." Miss James massaged her chilblains in an embarrassed way.

" Hum." Julian would have given a great deal to be able to ask her if she had overheard anything ; if his father had used the pen and ink on the writing table ; if Eric had gone away looking pleased. He gave Miss James twenty seconds, but, damn her ! she said nothing ; so he said very amiably : " It does my father good to see people. Cheers him up. Good-night, Miss James," and he went away across the hall and down the eight stone steps and the twenty yards of carriage drive. It was a very dark evening. The sky was heavily overcast, and to Julian, fresh from the lighted house, the outlines of the four tall elms along the frontage were scarcely discernible. He knew where each of them stood though, and their shapes and their sizes, for he had been a child in that garden in days when they weren't just four big trees which were probably unsafe and ought to be seen to, but were ships or cliffs or towers. He knew where the puddle in the drive was too, and he avoided that, and he found the latch of the gate without groping for it, and let himself out into the road.

The Elms is built on the slope of the hill, just below the place where the clay soil meets the gravel, so that the water, running off the hill, soaks into its foundations, making the vast basement well-nigh uninhabitable. It is a large house, ridiculous for one old man, Julian thought once again as he walked down the hill. He himself with his wife and two boys lived in a tiny house, semi-detached, not a gentleman's house at all, twenty minutes' walk from the Common, right down among the " Balmorals " and the " Kenilworths " at the bottom of the hill. He had lived there for ten years now, and for ten years he had hated it with a hatred originally born from a sort of shame for his failure to provide his wife with a better home. The house he had taken her from was small enough, smaller than " Lochaber," if it came to that, and it had stood in a back street, and its drains were doubtful. But it was different. It was a very old house, old and dim and gracious, standing in a back street in Oxford, looking at Merton chestnuts, listening to Magdalen bells. Now, however, the shame was forgotten, the wheel of custom had gone round, poor Phyl had become so much a part of " Lochaber " that sometimes he hated her too—on Sunday mornings, for instance, when he would catch a glimpse of her making the beds, toiling round them in her old brown overall, untidy, laborious, not now so young ; or when he came home in the evenings, and she came out of the kitchen to greet him with a flushed face and hands that felt greasy and smelled of hot meat. Other men,

men who had been boys with him, bought themselves long, cool houses, architects', not builders' houses, up in the pleasant roads leading off the Common, and they had wives with scarlet mouths and small, crinkled heads, and shapely skirts, just as good to look at as Greta Garbo or June. And they hadn't worked for it, at least none of them had worked harder or more ably than he. But they had been lucky. Their fathers had died and left them their patrimony, not that he wanted his father to die, but only to do the decent thing by him, to help with the boys' education or to buy him a house fit to live in, or best of all—and really what you would have expected—to put up the few, paltry thousands which would give him a partnership in the firm, instead of living on in that half-shut house with three servants and a housekeeper eating their heads off, and paying out enormous rates for it, and three-figure cheques one after another to keep his bastard son.

Julian had reached the foot of the hill. He turned into Canberry Gardens, crossed the road, and swung " Lochaber's " neat, iron gate. The light in the front hall, shining through the coloured glass above the lintel, and a street lamp a few yards further up the road, lit up the minute front garden, the Lilliputian lawn with its surround of golden privet, the hideous asphalt path winding so absurdly the few yards between the gate and the porch.

Phyl came out from the kitchen, and the opening door let into the hall the roar of gas jets and the smell of roasting meat. She said, " Hullo, Julian,"

and stood on tiptoe to place a passionless kiss on the cheek he bent down. She was wearing her old brown overall, and she had a fish slice and an oven-cloth in her hand. " Dinner's just ready," she said. " I'll bring it in."

Julian went upstairs to the bathroom to wash his hands. Michael was in the bath. He had already been there for three-quarters of an hour, but he had made no attempt to wash himself. He had been lying full length with the hot tap dripping to keep up the agreeable temperature of the water, and the bathroom was full of steam. His first warning of his father's arrival was the heavy tread in the passage, for he had been too deep in darkest China to hear the front door open and close. He now began hastily to lather the soap and splash. Julian was not deceived. " You've done nothing . . . nothing. You've simply been lying there, stewing, since half-past-six. You'll have a cold bath in future. Do you understand ? " Michael lifted his incredibly long eyelashes, and Phyl's blue eyes looked sullenly up.

" Yes," he muttered. He wasn't like John. He never argued or stood up to anyone. Like Phyl, he had strange consolations, books and clouds and birds.

Julian washed his hands and went down to the dining-room. Phyl from the kitchen was calling peevishly : " *Do* buck up, John," and John called back, " I *am* bucking up," in an exasperated tone. He had been doing his homework in the dining-room, and had got his tattered school books

together, but his fountain pen had leaked into a little pool on the polished table, and he was standing stock still, dipping a torn strip of blotting paper into the pool, and watching the ink run up. " That's not bucking up," said Julian. " And don't speak to your mother like that. I won't have it. And get out of here."

" Will you come and see me in bed, Daddy ? " asked John, screwing up the strip of blotting paper and placing it in the pocket of his grey flannel shorts. " All right," said Julian. John was his favourite. He was eleven years old, athletic, pugnacious, manly, insensitive, chivalrous, none of Michael's nonsense about him, balls more than birds to him, airplanes than clouds.

John picked up his school books, said " Rotten old arithmetic," and went away. Phyl came in to set the table.

" What a mess John makes," she grumbled. " When Michael has homework too, it'll be unbearable. You can still see the sum John did the day he forgot to put anything under his paper. Look, just where my tumbler goes. And it's wrong, too."

" What's for dinner ? " asked Julian.

" A leg of mutton and some greens, and then some Scotch woodcock."

" You seem to have gone mad on joints. We get nothing else these days."

" Well, they come in next day for the boys. Nice little things, like we used to have at home, just get finished. I don't *like* joints. If I lived alone, I should be a vegetarian." She went back into the

kitchen, and presently brought in the meat and vegetables.

Julian carved. He liked carving, liked to feel the skilful knife cut through the soft meat, enjoyed placing the neat slices one by one on the plates. And it was a good thing he did, for Phyl was squeamish, silly ; sometimes she didn't kill moths, though they fluttered from her wardrobe, and Julian had heard her apostrophize a wasp as " little brother," while she liberated it tenderly from the jam.

Phyl said, not much for her. She was not, as the saying goes, " good with men," and she did not realise how it irritated Julian to hear her say that, nor how it depressed him to eat alone. She saw him frown, and she asked nervously if the meat were underdone.

Julian hated nervousness. He had very little imagination, and was equally at ease with cabinet ministers, head waiters, erring office boys and invalids ; with equal readiness he would propose a toast, speak a homily or refuse to subscribe to a hospital. When he saw Phyl looking nervous, biting her lip and clasping her roughened hands, he felt not compassion but contempt. " How you do fuss," said Julian.

Phyl thought for a moment, and then said it had been muggy all day, hadn't it ? Her tact was so obvious that the remark came almost like an insult—you're bad-tempered, and I'm changing the subject—and Julian frowned again, two straight creases between his handsome black eyebrows,

and said " Hmph." Phyl made no further attempt at conversation. She sat staring at the sixpenny bunch of daffodils in the black bowl in the middle of the table, wondering how the Scotch woodcock was getting on in the oven, and whether it would be too dry.

Julian felt more cheerful as he filled himself with meat.

" I called in to see father on the way home," he said presently. " Three times in a quarter of an hour he asked me the time. It nearly drove me batty. I can't think how that woman can stand it. I suggested moving the clock in from the hall."

" Oh, Julian ! "

" Why ' Oh, Julian ? ' "

" Wasn't he offended ? "

" He was a bit snappy, but I really don't see why. He must know that he does it. I tried to get on to the subject of John's education, but, whenever I stopped talking, out came, " What's the time ? " Yet look what that other fellow gets from him."

" Well, after all, it's his own money. He's told you that he's leaving you everything, so I suppose he thinks that while he's alive he can spend his income as he likes."

" There won't be much to leave if that fellow keeps sponging on him. God knows how much he's had ! And when the doctor was in yesterday, he told Miss James that father'll outlast us all. Of course, that's exaggeration, but it means he may last for years. Well, we hope he will. But

John can't go on much longer at that rotten school."

" We shall have to do without a summer holiday, again, that's all," said Phyl. " More mutton, Julian ? " She hoped that he'd say no, because then there'd be enough for a cottage pie for to-morrow's dinner, as well as some cold slices for the boys' lunch. He did say no, and, while he piled the plates and dishes beside the sink in the scullery, she went into the kitchen and opened the gas oven. Thank goodness, the Scotch woodcock was all right, hot enough, not too dry. " Excellent," said Julian when he tasted it.

He wasn't a bad husband. He helped her wash up, drying everything that didn't go into the plate-rack, or which wasn't dried with the dish cloth wrung out, only retiring to the drawing-room with his newspaper when she began her eternal potter round. She was a hopeless manager, and never got finished, a habit of forgetfulness, and an over-lively conscience would often keep her on her feet till bedtime.

The drawing-room at " Lochaber " was a small, square room with a pair of French windows, which opened on a narrow garden strip. Many of the owners of identical houses all down Canberry Gardens and Griffiths Road used this room as a dining-room, because the front room was larger by reason of its handsome bow ; but Phyl had said that she couldn't sit all afternoon looking at the smug face of " Truro " across the road : she would sooner look down the unsatisfactory lawn—parched

in summer it was, sodden in winter, uneven so that deck chairs wobbled, everywhere clumps of bent grass which the mower missed—to the sycamore tree that Julian was going to have down when he could afford it, its etched branches against December sunsets, its swelling buds, the miracle of foliage, the music, chord on chord, of sunlight on leaves ; and though, as it had turned out, she had never sat all afternoon anywhere, the arrangement had held. Julian had chosen the dining-room furniture, over-ruling Phyl's faint predilection for yellow pottery and unvarnished woods, and he had created a room such as any other man of his means and education would have created, through the medium of mahogany reproductions of Mr. Sheraton's gentlemanly art. The drawing-room, however, was eloquent of Phyl ; it was poorly lighted and furnished without the faintest regard for luxury. At the end of the room, on the wall opposite the French windows, was an oak bookcase containing the works of Rupert Brooke, James Elroy Flecker, Charles Hamilton Sorley, Robert Nichols, F. W. Harvey, Francis Ledwidge, Herbert Asquith, and Edmund Blunden. A broad, rather bony sofa, covered in brown Holland, was drawn up to the fire ; above the banal white mantelpiece hung the Vasari Society's reproduction of a black chalk study by Michelangelo, beautiful, workmanlike and strong. On the other side stood a dark oak writing table, always very untidy, never a pen or a pencil to be found there ; and a gate-legged table littered with books, needlework and newspapers. Julian,

who was a good carpenter, had made window seats for the two small windows on either side of the long ones, and these were covered in a loosely woven material of the same, now faded, plum-colour, as the curtains and the Bokhara rug which carpeted, sparsely, the darkly stained floor. As a whole, the room was very different from the flowery, feminine drawing-rooms up and down Canberry Gardens, very different from Julian's prosperous, manly dining-room; though not austere—it was too friendly for that—it was grave, studious, epicene and young.

Julian sat in this room and read the newspaper. He had read the evening paper while he travelled home. Now he went back to the morning paper and read the golf article; he was something of a golfer, would have been more than respectable if he could have afforded to play regularly and not merely at the invitation of his friends—and the leading article, for he took the average man's post prandial interest in politics. He had just begun to read the correspondence when Phyl came in and said that she was off; when they weren't going out, and no one was likely to drop in on them, she had a depressing and rather stuffy habit of filling a hot-water bottle and going to bed at half-past nine.

Julian said, all right, he wouldn't be long, and read a letter about the de-rating bill, and one about pets in hot weather, and one about the railings in Hyde Park. Then he put the paper down and sat smoking his pipe and wondering how a general election would affect publishing. At ten o'clock

he got up, knocked out his pipe, raked the fire, and called Pilgrim, Phyl's Airedale terrier. " Pil, Pil," he called, and sometimes Phyl would think that he was calling " Phyl," and answer him. Pilgrim came stalking from the dining-room, and stood ready by the front door. On wet nights Julian let him out into the back garden, but on fine nights, out of consideration for the garden, he took him a little walk to the pillar box and back on the other side. Julian often thought that it was a case of canine intelligence well worth recording in a letter to the newspapers, how Pilgrim always knew whether it was wet or fine. Julian was fond of animals, and liked intelligence. He said " Good old fellow," approvingly, and opened the front door. Pilgrim ran down the asphalt path and waited at the gate. Man and dog passed through into the road.

It was the first night that Julian had been out without his overcoat, an early spring night, genial, moist and warm. The sky was overcast, not a star showing, and a light south-west wind blew up from the Surrey hills. Canberry Gardens smelled of spring, all the more because there were no stars showing, and it was spring between earth and cloud. But Canberry Gardens didn't stir. Up in the best bedrooms lights went on, at dressing-tables in the bow windows women brushed the dust of the houses from their hair, and thought out to-morrow's shopping ; down in the drawing-rooms lights went out, men called mildly for " Jock " and " Puss." No one in Canberry Gardens felt like Julian, restless, discontented, potential, forty, putting on

weight, thickening at the waist, hair showing grey at the temples, gums receding, getting on, getting old, and never having half the things a man could have. They called in their dogs, wound their clocks, washed themselves and went to sleep by their wives. It was nothing to them that the wind blew from the Surrey hills, and the smell of spring was in the night. They were content, content to labour six days, and to mow the lawn on Sundays, and to eat cheaply and to lie with the desiccating women they had loved and tired of years and years ago. But Julian wasn't. He was not of that clay. He wasn't bovine, and he wasn't afraid of things, and he didn't believe in an after-life and its fortuitous reparations. He wanted everything he could get before that awful time when he would cease, be nothing, know nothing, simply have missed. And he might have had everything. Life came easily to him. He was a good-looking man, in a heavy way ; men liked him because he was honest and friendly, and a good golfer, and could tell a story and knew a good dinner and had been to Rugby and done well in the war ; and highly-sexed women liked him because he was solid, and they mistook weight for strength, both in body and mind. If only he had had a little money, he could have had all the friends, men and women, that he wanted ; as it was, he couldn't even join a golf club, or give Cynthia Bechler lunch at the Savoy. He wasn't a man who would keep young beyond his time, and he knew it, and here was spring again. He passed the pillar box, where he usually turned back, and

walked on to the corner, and stood looking down Griffiths Road, watching the tall, lighted trams sail by. The corner of Griffiths Road and Canberry Gardens is a smug enough place by day, but now in the thick blue darkness the street lamps were eloquent as torches, the trams lovely as schooners, the roar of the trains on the Southern Railway was significant of distance, flight, and speed. Yes, life could be beautiful and exciting; could pulse, delight and thrill. But not for him. He was condemned to Canberry Gardens, to labour six days, and mow his lawn and ask his neighbours in to coffee and discuss gardening with the men and the iniquities of morning-girls with the women, those housewives and mothers to whom he was not a man, but little Mrs. Prebble's husband, the father of those boys. Oh, damn! thought Julian, I can't stand another summer of it; and he thought of golf links, green, pine-scented in the spring evenings, and of whiskies-and-sodas, and of everybody laughing, and of pretty women in summer frocks, and of lobster mayonaise. And when he began to walk back along Canberry Gardens, because he had no money and that was the end of it, before his mind's eye, there passed an imaginary scene. He was in his office. A telephone bell rang, and a voice said: "Is that Mr. Prebble? This is Doctor Hornburn speaking. I am very sorry to have to tell you, Mr. Prebble, that your father has passed away."

"Good God, Doctor, this is very sudden."

"Well, I always warned you that, though he

might go on for years, there was this possibility."

"Yes, I remember. Well, Doctor, I'll come at once." And then, "Oh, Sir Curtis, I've just had some shocking news. My father's gone quite suddenly."

"Oh, dear, I'm sorry to hear that, Prebble. You must take a few days off, of course, and please allow me to express my sincere regret."

And then, *Among the mourners was Mr. Julian Prebble, M.C., the only surviving son . . .* and *We are informed that Mr. Julian Prebble has recently become a partner in the well-known publishing firm of Curtis, Fayre and Haydon . . .* and *Dear Miss Bechler, There are still one or two points about your forthcoming novel which I should like to talk over with you, and as I find I am booked up with appointments this week, I should be so pleased if you would lunch with me at the Savoy . . .* Julian came to a standstill at the gate of "Lochaber," and his pleasant day-dream faded. He looked up at the dolls' house façade; Phyl's light was out. Probably she was asleep. He stood by the gate calling roughly for the dog.

But Phyl wasn't asleep. She had tumbled into bed without much of a wash, dog-tired and worried about her legs, which ached, and she hoped it wasn't the beginning of varicose veins. She had opened the window, and, as she lay in bed, she noticed that the air wasn't cold, that she needn't bury her nose in the blankets, nor hug her hot-water bottle. So, she thought, it's spring, *Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses . . .* and she was back again in the little

house that looked on Merton chestnuts, and listened to Magdalen bells, and her father was sitting at the round table in the dining-room with dessert before him, and quoting George Herbert over his wine. Phyl didn't often think about her girlhood now; it seemed very far away, and she had lost everything that had gone to make it so lovely, her father and her mother and the house and the habit of quoting George Herbert, and the whole outlook of the generation that had died, and taken its philosophies with it, in the Great War. She had been a sedate child, had done well at school, and grown up in the heedless culture of the place to the fashion for long walks and long talks, and poetry and platonic friendships, and dining-room tea, which had immediately preceded the War. Julian had fallen in love with her then; their first meeting had been in just such weather as this, in Christ Church Meadow, with the floods out, and a wet saffron sky behind the elms. And she had refused him on just such an evening, upstairs in the little, crooked library, sitting in the firelight, young and grave and introspective, after the manner of the times. But later, a couple of years later, when her grey-haired, donnish father had laid down his life with the young soldiers in Mesopotamia, and she and her mother were living very poorly in London, she had accepted him, and, when the War was over and he back in his office, he had bought "Lochaber," and Cecilia Aitken had gone back to live in Florence, in the dilettante circle from which she had come. It was not when she was married, but on the day when she

had moved into " Lochaber," that Phyl's old life had ended. " A beastly little house, but it will do *pro tem.*" Julian had reassured her, and she had arranged her poets in the bookshelves, and that had been the end of them. Time, awful, irresistible, nothing too great nor too small for it, had passed and passed. Long walks, long talks, platonic friendships and dining-room tea were no longer fashionable, and Phyl didn't learn any new tricks ; but neither was she any longer Phyl Aitken, who had lived in a little crooked house in Merton Street, and been top of examinations at Wychwood, and known more about the Mediæval Stage than her father, and refused Julian Prebble up in the library, in the firelight, among the books. Not even secretly, nor a captive, lived her old self. She had forgotten the seventh stanza of the *Ode to a Nightingale*, didn't know who had written *The Pulley*, couldn't have quoted the closing lines of *Lycidas*. When she was alone, she thought of Michael's difficult character, and how long, with luck, John's shirts would last. To herself, as much as to other people, she was quiet little Mrs. Prebble, who worked so hard and dressed so badly, and never went anywhere, Julian's wife, John and Michael's mother, Gladys's lady, the housewife of Number 10. She wasn't Professor Aitken's daughter any longer, and it was very seldom that she remembered him. It's the weather, she thought, real, muggy Oxford weather, and that quotation ; and she heard Julian's steps come down the street and his voice call roughly for the dog. I was a fool to marry him, she thought,

but that was such an old grievance, had been thought over, wept over, so many nights, that it hadn't any longer a sting. In fact: if I hadn't married him, I shouldn't have had the boys, she thought, hearing Julian bolt the front door and go upstairs to his dressing-room over the porch ; and she thought of John and Michael, how long and brown and firm their legs were in summer, when they didn't wear any stockings, but only sandshoes ; how clear and young their voices in the early morning garden ; how thoughtful their faces when they sat before the fire sucking oranges, eight for sixpence, on winter evenings, how cold and bright and fragile was their lovely youth. Some people believe that love isn't meant to last after you've had children, she remembered, and she thought, love's not the only thing in life, if only we had a bit more money, we could be quite reasonably happy, though it's gone. Julian came out from the bathroom, his tooth brush dropped into its stand with the accustomed porcellanic chink, his shoes went down clump in the passage, so that Gladys could get at them in the morning without going into the room and being tempted by the small change on the dressing-table, his braces flipped the linoleum. If his father died, thought Phyl—of course one doesn't want him to, but supposing he did . . . Julian switched on the light.

" Asleep ? "

" Nearly."

She opened her eyes and saw him standing by his bed, in his pink and white striped poplin

pyjamas, Julian at forty, burly and commonplace. She saw him look, as he always did, at the window, to make sure that it was open ; once or twice in their married life she had forgotten it, and he had wakened in the morning with a mouth it needed Kipling to describe. " I shan't mind if my eider-down does fall off to-night," he said, pulling down the bedclothes, getting in, rolling over, settling down.

" No, it's a spring night," she agreed, remembering that there wasn't a coal bill in summer, and that the early mornings weren't dark, and that you didn't need to do so much cooking with all the fruit about, and that, though there were white flannels, there weren't so many underclothes, and it worked out at much the same.

" Good-night," said Julian, switching off the light.

" Good-night," said Phyl. She thought, I'll cut the boys' slices off before I make the pie, and she hoped it was imagination and not varicose veins, and she slept.

CHAPTER II

NOT TO-DAY

JULIAN'S office was on the ground floor of the building which has been owned and occupied by the firm of Curtis Fayre and Haydon since the benevolent year of eighteen-hundred-and-thirty-three. It was quite a pleasant room, though it was small, and looked out on a side street, whereas Mr. Bailey's room, like Sir Curtis's and Mr. Haydon's, looked into the branches of the plane trees, which deeply shade the locked and deserted garden of the Bloomsbury square. Across the side street is a long, symmetrical row of houses, erected rather than built during the unaffected reign of our Sailor King, and now chiefly occupied by Indian students, who pass perpetually up and down the pavement, with the incorporeal East in their light footfalls and loose-leaved note-books under their arms. Pigeons, plump charity children of a spare neighbourhood, walk there too, and Americans in the season of Americans, and spectacled persons who are going to the British Museum, and have lost their way. Still, the street couldn't be called noisy, and Julian had his table right under the window, which left the rest of the room agreeably free.

Against the opposite wall stood a very fine Sheraton bookcase, containing recent publications of an ephemeral nature unsuited to the partners' rooms. The Turkey carpet, which had been laid in the room in eighteen-hundred-and-thirty-three, still warmly covered the substantial oak floor, and, on either side of the fireplace, so arranged that they had not been sat upon once in ninety-six years, and much too good for an office, said Sir Curtis (but Mr. Haydon had been a young man when publishing *was* publishing), stood a couple of perfect Sheraton chairs. Into the room, in spite of Julian and his sales' analyses, had crept the spirit of Bloomsbury, faded, frugal, gentle with the stripped gentility of culture, absent-minded, narrow-chested, short-sighted, shoulders bowed.

There were people in London who said that if you had dealings with Curtis, Fayre and Haydon, Prebble was the man to see ; and it was true that, while Mr. Haydon sat up in his dignified room, remembering Mr. Browning, and Sir Curtis Fayre sat up in his beautiful room prophesying a romantic revival, Julian sat down in his merely pleasant room getting things done. He was not a literary man. On leaving school he had entered a publishing house, because his father, a printer, had thought that it must be a fine thing to be a publisher ; but he was a sound man of business, and invaluable to the scatter-brain principals of his firm. Mr. Haydon was getting on ; he had been born on the same day as Mr. William Watson ; he was seriously contemplating retirement, and he had no son to

succeed him in the firm. He liked Prebble : Sir Curtis liked Prebble ; if only Prebble had had a little money behind him, something could have been arranged. But he hadn't ; so one or two ideas were vaguely formulating—a cousin of Sir Curtis . . an amalgamation with Mr. James Fraser . . . a limited company—and Prebble would have to continue a servant of the firm at the same small salary, because sound business men were easy to come by in comparison with men who had shaken hands with Mr. Browning, or who could foretell a romantic revival years and years before it came.

On this spring morning, Julian had a hundred and one things to do.

Forty Years East of Alexandria had been advertised for publication on the first of March, and Sir Perceval Strickland, K.C.B., had not yet returned the galley proofs ; that fool, young Thompson, had made a muck of the Spring List, crediting with the theological studies of Archdeacon Haggart, the author of *The Nature of Variation* and *Heredity and Sex* ; four illustrations in the current number of the *Quarterly Journal of Botany* had been printed upside down ; the office boy had given notice ; Professor Gibbings was surprised and disgusted by the cheap vulgarity of the jacket with which Messrs. Curtis, Fayre and Haydon had seen fit to insult his work on *The Growth of China since* 1846 ; and there was no cheque from America. And Sir Curtis would like a word with Mr. Prebble ; and would Mr. Prebble step up to Mr. Haydon's room as soon

as convenient ; and Miss Bechler's appointment was at twenty minutes to twelve.

Julian dictated his letters. Mr. Haydon thought this a vulgar habit ; he wrote all his letters in his own hand. Sir Curtis steered a middle course. He had a meek, blond secretary, a Somerville girl, with a better degree than his own, and he would tell her what to say—" A firm letter to Messrs. Spiffkins, Miss Bonner," or, " A courteous letter to my friend the Archdeacon "—and she would write his letters for him and at the end of the week draw her two-pounds-ten.

Julian was a rapid worker. He knew his own mind and ignored other people's. By twenty minutes to twelve he had written firmly to Professor Gibbings, harshly to Sir Perceval Strickland, soothingly to the Editor of the *Quarterly Journal of Botany* ; he had cabled to America, composed an Errata slip for the Spring List, reprimanded young Thompson, conferred with Mr. Haydon, listened to Sir Curtis, and written out an advertisement for a new office boy. He was quite ready for Miss Bechler when she was shown in.

Cynthia Bechler was a historical novelist ; her " cloak and sword " romances were nearer to " best sellers " than anything to be found in the sober general catalogue of Messrs. Curtis, Fayre and Haydon. She was dark ; not just brown-haired like Phyl, but strikingly dark, and very tall ; fifty years ago she would have been ridiculed as a " maypole," and considered unmarriageable. She was not beautiful, not pretty ; her nose was too

large, aquiline yet lacking delicacy, and she had too full a mouth, too heavy a chin. But her eyes were beautiful, almond-shaped, tawny amber-brown, the lower, as well as the upper, lashes prettily curled ; and she was admirably *soignée*, eyebrows plucked, mouth painted, the two tiny curls, showing under her black helmet hat, immaculately waved. She was dressed in a black coat and skirt, perfectly tailored, and she wore a dark-red button-hole and a supple stone-marten stole wound round her long neck. Her embroidered gloves and the large, old rings on her white hands gave a sudden picturesqueness to her otherwise strictly conventional attire, and one thought of the Middle Ages, of Venice—" *Was a lady such a lady, cheeks so round and lips so red* "—of battle and murder, and the poisoned cup and the stab in the dark, just as she had meant one to do.

" Good morning, Miss Bechler," said Julian. He got up and shook hands with her. Her hand was cold, and hard with her rings. Her tawny eyes were on a level with his. A thrill such as he had not felt in ten years ran through him. He released her hand, indicated a chair, and sat down himself.

" Well, Mr. Prebble," said Miss Bechler, in her deep, gay voice. " You see, I've come to worry you again." Sitting in the leather armchair, with her knees crossed and unwinding, the fur stole from her neck, she was completely at her ease, not a trace of shyness, anxiety nor a desire to impress. It wasn't a manner, her complacency. She felt it to the core. She was twenty-six, success-

ful, and men of Julian's age fell in love with her quite invariably. Boys didn't. They thought that she painted her face and put on side.

"It's not a worry, it's a pleasure," said Julian.

"It's very polite of you to say so, anyhow," returned Miss Bechler, and she smiled, not a pretty smile, but mirthful, provocative, and, because she had brown eyes, tender. "And I'm going to be terribly brief and business-like to-day, Mr. Prebble. I want to talk to you about *Domino*. I've had a letter from a film company . . . "

She had, had she? That meant more success for her, more money, more fame, more admiration; and his heart warmed to her as she sat there talking in her deep, gay voice, brilliant and successful and young. He was a worldly man, made worldly by his best qualities, just as laziness or nervousness or inefficiency will sometimes make your saint; he valued success, admired brilliance, loved gaiety in women, and yet was condemned to live a drudging villa life tied to a woman who thought of nothing but housekeeping, and had forgotten what it was to be gay. And—here lay the sting—that wasn't through any fault or inability of his own. He wasn't brilliant, wasn't literary, but he was intelligent and cheerful, and the jargon soon came; a couple of evenings with Cynthia Bechler, and he would have taken his place quite naturally in the set to which she belonged. A couple of evenings! He saw her provocative smile across the flowers and the napery and the silver and the

rose-coloured traditions of a table for two, he walked into the stalls behind her and saw heads turn, he danced with her, holding that exquisite body in his arms. " By the terms of your contract, as I remember it, we're only entitled to twenty-five per cent. of your film royalties," he said, and he thought, damn it ! She only thinks of me as her publisher.

But she didn't. She liked Julian. The men in her set were little more than boys ; when they grew up, either they became discouraged with the arts and took positions as salesmen in the motor trade, or they became successful and took wives, and went to live in mental and moral and physical inaccessibility in Palace Gate ; and she was a very romantic woman, and she liked men with experience behind them better than those etiolate, potential boys. Julian had lived for forty years ; and Cynthia Bechler saw life no thin-lipped spiritual experiment, no evolutionary interval, but a rich, abundant, emotional affair, splendid as purple velvet, dramatic as a sword-hilt, dangerous as dinner with the Borgias, passionate as a rose. She said, " Well, I mustn't keep you any longer," and stood waiting for him to say when was he going to see her again, and what about a little dinner and a show ? for she had met him on three occasions now, and it was time for that. But he only said " Good-bye," and " Don't be too long before you look us up again, Miss Bechler," and opened the door. Odd, she thought, very ; and she wound her fur stole round her long throat.

Perhaps he's got a jealous wife, she thought, and she went out through the hall, pleased that her coat fitted her so perfectly across the back, because Julian was following her. They stood on the steps and the soft wind from the south-west blew on Julian's forehead and in his hair. He asked how she was going to get home. " I'll walk through into Oxford Street and pick up a taxi."

" You live in Chelsea, don't you ? "

" Yes, I've a flat in Chelsea Court, disgustingly modern, but it's got a view over the river."

" What more could you want ? "

" Oh, lots. I'm a terribly greedy person. I'll have a really old house complete with yew hedges and a ghost when I've made my fortune."

" That won't be long," said Julian smiling, looking young with his hair ruffled and tell-tale eyes. She liked him fortyish, but she had a warm heart for men and children, and it was a joy to see him not a day over thirty-five. A jealous wife wouldn't frighten him, she thought ; it's some impossible loyalty. He looked loyal ; with the loyalty of the rock not of the blade ; and in common with all the women who liked Julian, she mistook solidity for strength. She smiled back at him.

" You're so encouraging. I shall finish off the last five thousand words of *Nor Devil nor Spaniard* to-night," she said, and she waved her hand in its gay, embroidered glove, and went away laughing. Julian watched until she turned the corner of the square.

How dismal his office seemed now! He couldn't stand it. He picked up his hat and went out to lunch, if you can call it lunch, he thought as he ate the *plât du jour* of a cheap restaurant, sitting opposite a commercial traveller of the old school with a diamond tie-pin and a waxed moustache. He was back in his office by two. An author came in to dispute a charge for excess corrections, and a literary agent to discuss a contract, and with tea came Walter Bailey wondering if it would be as well to stop advertising *Domino* and give someone else a turn. "I wouldn't if I were you," said Julian. "Properly handled, that girl's going a long way." He felt happy then, glad to be of service to Miss Bechler, for he was a chivalrous man; years ago he had meant to do fine things for Phyl.

"The Old Man wants to advertise his three-and-sixpennies," said Walter Bailey. "What the hell's the use? No one buys *The Poetical Works of Cowper*, or *Southey's Poems*, unless he's damned well got to, and if he's got to, he does. I mean, advertising won't keep that sort of stuff going, it's the Board of Education, God bless it."

"Hmm," said Julian.

Walter Bailey went away and Julian signed his letters, full of mistakes as usual, margins skew-eyed, punctuation awful, why can't these girls be taught something useful at school? Then he went home. It was rather early, and there were still one or two jobs he might have done, but he felt restless, unsettled, partly the weather, he thought, and partly that girl this morning, and,

anyhow, to-morrow's Saturday ; I'll go in and see Father again on my way home, and then I needn't bother with him till Sunday supper. He bought an evening paper and read it in the train, but the Rugger results and the Election rumours and the changes in the 'Varsity crews couldn't quite keep his thoughts from Cynthia Bechler ; the girls who sat opposite him, rows and rows of them with scarlet mouths, and legs that were legs to the knee, and sometimes beyond it, disturbed and reminded him ; a man never got quite used to modern fashions who had been twenty-one as long ago as nineteen-seven. Walking up from the station towards The Elms, he hadn't any girls to disturb him, but he hadn't the evening paper either, and it was dusk, and from the gardens came a smell of damp, turned earth and growing grass. He wasn't a nature-lover ; though he liked flowers and appreciated a sea breeze, he wasn't sensitive to sunshine, wind, the first primrose, running water or the hills. But spring was different ; it got into your blood, and the damnable thing was that very soon it wouldn't ; " *Golden girls and boys all must, like chimney-sweepers, come to dust,*" said some poet or another ; and that wasn't the worst of it ; long before you came to dust, thought Julian, you come to an armchair in the morning-room, and all the windows shut, and your brain in a muddle, and your body slowly dying, arteries hardening, skin withering, muscles slackening, nerves wasting, ugly, imbecile, emasculate ; spring doesn't get into your blood then. He turned up

the drive of The Elms. The gate stood open. Coming down the steps from the front door was his half-brother, Eric. He was humming a little syncopated tune, and returning a leather wallet to the inside breast pocket of his pale grey, double-breasted coat.

"Hullo!" said Julian. One must, he felt, be sorry for Eric; it was a terrible thing to be illegitimate, and it was always with surprise that he heard Eric laugh or hum, or saw him display any kind of cheerfulness.

"Hullo, Julian!" said Eric, standing on the steps and pulling a pair of very yellow chamois leather gloves on his manicured hands. "Coming to see Father? I've been having tea with him."

"How is he?"

"Very spry," said Eric, buttoning his gloves and placing his gold-mounted malacca cane smartly under his arm.

"Hornburn speaks well of him," said Julian. "If you can call it well. Says he may go on for years. But, after all, what is it? A living death!"

"Oh, come!" said Eric. "Surely it's not as bad as that. The old gentleman enjoys his food, and his drink too, at least as much of it as that she-wolf lets him have. It wouldn't be a bad thing to get rid of her. What do you think?"

"Rid of Miss James?" said Julian. "Oh, no! She's most trustworthy. I've never heard father complain."

"Oh, well, I daresay it was only his joke," said

Eric easily. " We were having a laugh over her at tea. He hasn't much to interest him, poor old boy."

Julian never laughed with his father. He changed the subject.

" What are you doing with yourself just now ? "

" Oh, I'm resting. As a matter of fact, I'm thinking of going in for the films."

" Not much in that, is there ? I mean, unless you're a star."

" Oh, well, one hopes," said Eric, and Julian looked at his pink face and his big, blue eyes and his pale, elegant suit, and his air of being twenty-five and successful when he was really thirty, and as dismal a failure as you could wish to see ; and he thought with envy, yes, damn you, you do. " One can't live on hope," he said disagreeably.

" Oh, well, no," admitted Eric. He always began sentences with " Oh," a habit which gave an airy, girlish quality to his conversation. And he said " Oh " and " No " with a round mouth and the refined accent he had learned from his mother in his indulged and happy childhood in the pink and white flat in Maida Vale. " Still, something always turns up," he said, and indeed in his wallet now was George Wellesley Prebble's cheque for one hundred pounds. " Cheerio, Julian," he said. " All the best to you ! " and he went away down the drive, humming *Bluebirds*, unresentful, pacific and young.

Julian went indoors.

" Mr. Eric's been down again," said Miss James.

" I met him at the door," said Julian.

" I don't know if I'm doing right to tell you, Mr. Julian, but I've a feeling that you ought to know. Something you said the other day . . . and then one has these feelings . . . I hope I'm not doing wrong . . . "

" Well, go on."

" Mr. Prebble wrote Mr. Eric a cheque at tea-time, Mr. Julian. I saw it when I went in to make sure that the little cakes were all right. It was a very large one, or I shouldn't have mentioned it. One hundred pounds. I hope I haven't taken a liberty."

" No, you're quite right to tell me. I hope you'll always mention anything like that. Of course we can't prevent anything. I mean, my father knows perfectly well what he's doing. At present, anyhow. Thank you, Miss James."

He went into the morning-room. A slow fire was burning. The windows were closed. It was a marvel that Eric could come out from that room looking as fresh as a daisy, but then it was a marvel that he could look happy when he was illegitimate, and prosperous when he had been booed by the gallery on the first night of *She's My Girl*, and out of a job ever since. The moment that Julian entered the room, he felt dull and heavy.

" Good-evening, Father."

George Prebble looked up. He had been chuckling over a story that Eric had told him, a story about

stage folk, such as Queenie used to have for him years ago; and it was like coming back to Margaret and The Elms after an evening with Queenie to hear Julian's voice behind him, dutiful, educated and serious. "Well, Julian, what's brought you?" he said, and then realised that he had forgotten Eric's story. He thought and thought; and could feel his brain failing him, not connecting, something wouldn't grip up there inside his skull. "What was it?" he said. "What was it? What the devil was it that Eric said?"

Julian, who had been talking amiably about the traffic problem, was silent; only once or twice in his lifetime had his father mentioned Eric to him by name.

"Can't you tell me what it was?" said George Prebble, and Julian said, "No, I'm afraid I can't." He said it rather coldly, and his father looked away from him and said, "Well, it doesn't matter. What's the time?"

Julian told him. "I came home early," he said, "because I wanted to have a little business talk with you. It's got to this stage: Mr. Haydon's retiring, and there's no one in the firm suitable for a partnership but me."

"I know. You told me that before."

"Well, now they're beginning to look round outside, and even to consider a limited company, though I know Sir Curtis hates the idea of that. It's now or never, as far as I'm concerned. Sir Curtis has practically offered me a partnership, but of course he expects me to put some money in."

" So you told me. Well, why don't you do it? You must have saved something."

" How could I have saved anything, Father? You know what the cost of living is nowadays. What I earn doesn't go any further than three hundred a year did in your time."

" I married on three hundred a year," said George Prebble, " and in five years I had bought this place. You're all so impatient nowadays. You can't save, you can't wait, so you never get anything. Serves you right. What's the time? "

" Twenty-five past," said Julian. " Well, Father, I did hope you'd help me in this. I'm not asking you to throw your money away, you know. Curtis, Fayre and Haydon—well, it's a sound investment."

" I don't want to invest money in Curtis, Fayre and Haydon," said George Prebble. " The stuffiest, most old-fashioned firm of publishers in the British Isles! Text books and reprints is all they can manage, and *Through Malay with a Mosquito*, and *Ninety Years in Nigeria*. Why don't they publish something spicy and make some money? "

" Sir Curtis is old-fashioned certainly, but he's quite amenable. When Mr. Haydon's gone . . . "

" You're old-fashioned yourself, Julian," said George Prebble, and he sat and shook with laughter, dried-up old laughter, he, he, he.

" I may be," said Julian, nettled, but patient. " Still, I know what they want nowadays, and could give it to them, even if it's not what I admire. And you see, Father, even though the policy of

the firm doesn't impress you, you'd be helping me. I know you're generous. You help other people " . . .

George Prebble stopped shaking. He gave Julian a sharp look, and then closed his eyes.

" If by ' other people ' you mean my son Eric, yes, I do help him, and very generously ; and I shall continue to do so during my lifetime. When I'm done for, all my property will go to you, simply because I think that's right and proper." He opened his eyes suddenly and glared at Julian. " What more do you expect ? "

" I don't expect anything more, Father. Only, this opportunity has occurred, and I've got the boys to educate, and I thought it might give you more pleasure to do something while you're here."

" It wouldn't give me any pleasure," said George Prebble, frankly. " No pleasure at all. As for educating your boys, I had no education, and I did very much better than you're doing in spite of your expensive public school."

" The War . . . " began Julian.

" Tch, tch," said his father. " I'm sick to death of hearing about the War. It's been over for more than ten years now, and yet it's responsible for everything ; for short skirts and dangerous driving, and naughty children, and all the robbery and the drunkenness and the murder and the adultery that goes on nowadays. I wish we'd had a war to blame everything on when we were young."

" I think," said Julian quietly, " that you'll find that most people, doctors and so on, agree

with me. It's an established fact that air-raids and the lack of sugar have affected children. However . . . " he got up. " I'm sorry I bothered you."

" You didn't bother me in the least," said George Prebble, grinning. " Nothing you did, Julian, would bother me."

Julian wasn't a coward. He would have given much at that moment to speak his angry mind. But the old man was quite capable of altering his will ; Julian had heard of cases of just such senile spitefulness, and it would be a job to prove that he wasn't *compos mentis* at the time. So he managed to smile and say that he would come in Sunday evening as usual, and then he went away thinking furiously, jealously, indignantly, how Eric had left this room only half-an-hour ago with a cheque for a hundred pounds. He hadn't come here to-night with the intention of broaching the partnership question, but, meeting Eric, hearing what Miss James had to tell him, and, somehow, vaguely, his interview with Miss Bechler this morning, had combined to spur him on. Well, it's over now, he thought, setting off down the hill, and I can't hope for anything but that the old man won't last long. The thought—bald like that—shocked him. After all, he's my father : true to his generation, Julian accepted the phrase. Others came. *A living death.* Eric said it wasn't, but what ideas had he beyond jazz and flappers, and silk haberdashery from the Burlington Arcade ? *A happy release. For his own sake we must pray that he doesn't linger on.* Yes, that's the way to look at it, thought

Julian, walking down hill which he hated; it's no use being sentimental; one should try to imagine oneself in his place. Would one want to go on, knowing that one could only get worse, more and more imbecile, every morning nearer and nearer to drivelling idiocy? Of course not. One would pray to be taken or one would suck a gas tube according to one's religious ideas. Justified, his hopes grew. Hornburn says he may go on for years, but equally that he may pop off any minute. For his own sake, thought Julian, turning into Canberry Gardens, entirely for his own sake, I hope he'll pop off soon.

Canberry Gardens was very dark, and quiet except for a murmur of dissenting voices, louder as Julian approached his home. "I won't . . . I won't. You beastly, unfair pig . . . I'm not going to . . ." he heard as he hurried up the path with his latchkey ready and inserted it in the Yale lock. "I'm not going to . . . I won't . . ." He flung open the door. John with an expression of immutable obstinacy on his flushed face was clinging to the lowest banister of the staircase, from which Phyl, in her brown overall, with her hair in her eyes, was attempting forcibly to detach him.

"John!" boomed Julian.

Phyl left hold of John, put her hair back, and stooped in her tired way to pick up a crumpled tea-cloth from the stairs. John left hold of the banisters.

"What does this mean, John?" demanded Julian.

John wasn't going to tell tales.

" Ask Michael," he said.

Julian hated a row with Michael ; he would much rather have a row with John. Rows with John were straightforward, baculine ; but Michael lied, lay awake, sobbed himself sick, put up one idiotic story after another, and you could beat him black and blue or tell him off for hours and never know at the end if you had had the truth.

" Can't *you* tell me, John ? " said Julian, but John said " No."

Phyl said : " It was something too ridiculous. Michael took the ink into his bedroom to draw with, and wouldn't let John have it, so John got behind with his homework ; but that's no reason why he should be rude and refuse to turn off the table when I want to set it."

" Isn't it ? " John burst out. " If I don't finish my homework, and I get a detention, who grumbles then ? "

" Go upstairs, John," ordered Julian. " You can get up half-an-hour earlier to-morrow and finish your homework before breakfast. Now look sharp ! Clear out ! "

John went briskly upstairs, and Julian turned to Phyl.

" What a scene for a tired man to come home to ! Can't you send a boy upstairs without having to push him ? I could hear the noise as I turned the corner of the road."

Phyl stood at the foot of the stairs and looked

up at him with eyes like hill lakes on a very wet day. She was not a tall woman, and she looked dumpy now in her overall and easy shoes. Her hair was untidy, her eyebrows petulantly drawn together, her skin was moist from the steam of the saucepans. Before his inward eye, in contrast, stood Cynthia Bechler, admirably *soignée*, eyebrows plucked, mouth painted, the tiny curls under her black helmet hat immaculately waved. " You've no control over those boys," said Julian, furious, hating life and the tricks it played you. " They're all right ; they only want a little firmness ; they always obey me ; but what you do is to nag, nag, nag, and make everything and everybody miserable all day long."

Phyl looked up at him for a moment longer. Then, quite suddenly, her face puckered, and, pushing past him, she ran into the kitchen and shut the door. Too long married to be impressed by that, he took the newspaper into the dining-room, and presently she came in there, and went to the sideboard, and began to get out the table mats.

" What's for dinner ? " asked Julian.

Phyl didn't look at him.

" Tomato soup, and cottage pie with greens, and kipper-on-toast," she said in a lacrymose voice.

" Good," said Julian.

She came across to the table holding the mats and some knives and forks and spoons, and began

to set them out. As he turned over a page of the newspaper, he glanced at her. His thought was, good lord! how can a woman like that hope to keep a man? Phyl had never been really smart, but, at the time when he had fallen in love with her, she had always been charmingly dressed; in summer she had worn shady hats and had had a quantity of crisp, bright, cotton frocks and the riverside convention of white stockings and shoes; in winter she had dressed in warm browns; her evening frocks had been flowery and picturesque. And she had always had a good deal to say for herself, not nonsense, but all of it worth saying, and she had had an unusual way of putting things and a quaint, quiet wit of her own. Yet now she never opened her mouth except to utter commonplaces; she didn't seem to find any fun in anything; and he scarcely ever saw her out of an overall unless they were going somewhere, and then it was her old black lace. With every street, every restaurant, every train full of girls like Cynthia Bechler, how could such a woman hope to keep a man?

She had gone out into the kitchen; now she came back with two plates of her thin tomato soup. Husband and wife sat down in silence. The soup was very hot. In silence they stirred it. At length, Julian spoke.

"It's no use sulking with me. It's not my fault you can't manage the boys."

Phyl put her spoon down.

"I can manage them . . . usually," she

said in a spasmodic, hysterical way. " It's only sometimes . . . they get on my nerves . . . at the end of the day. I think I ought to have a tonic."

" If your own children get on your nerves, a tonic won't help you," said Julian. " And, anyhow, I don't believe in flying to drugs. Still, if you want a tonic, why don't you get one instead of grumbling ? "

" They're so expensive. The tonic you had after 'flu was four-and-six for quite a tiny bottle."

" It would be worth more than four-and-six to me to have some cheerfulness about the place when I come in. I suppose the fact is that you think you've got too much to do. What about working-class women with six or eight children, and no electric light or hot water laid on ? You should think of them."

Phyl said nothing.

" If you wanted to lead an idle life, you shouldn't have married a poor man," said Julian, angry with her because he was angry with himself, and that not so much because he was sorry for her as because he was sorry for making out of the daughter of a scholar, with an European reputation, this shabby, household drudge.

Phyl got up and took away the soup plates. She didn't answer him because he was perfectly right ; having married a poor man, she couldn't expect to lead an idle life ; and she realised, though

always with surprise and pity, that probably more than fifty per cent. of the women of England were worse off than herself. Further (for she had threshed out the subject long before he came to it), though she had lost her husband's love, she still had his affection and his loyalty, and how many women had more than that at the end of thirteen years? And the house, smug as it was, was sunny and convenient, and the boys were good boys, intelligent, handsome and healthy, tiresome sometimes, but not nearly so tiresome as other people's children. Dispassionately, she was content. Why there was no more fun in life, no more joy in the morning, nothing in the world to laugh at or to hope for, she could not, herself, understand; and, as a last resort, she became practical, and because it wasn't liver, she put it down to nerves. Julian having relieved her foolish conscience of the reproach of selfish expenditure, she went out next morning with "*Tonic for self*" inscribed in her small, academic handwriting on her shopping list. However, eggs had gone up in the night, and rhubarb was in and Julian was so fond of it, and John had said at breakfast that his brogues, only bought at Christmas, let the wet in, and Michael needed a tooth brush, the bristles were falling out of his, and you had to get a good one because of anthrax. So by the time that Phyl reached the chemist's, she hadn't got four-and-sixpence, and it was Saturday morning, and she crossed "*Tonic for self*" off her shopping list, and only bought a tooth brush, a shilling one, hygienically wrapped and

British made. " Anything else to-day, Madam ? " said the chemist's assistant, and Phyl said, " No, thank you, not to-day."

CHAPTER III

SUNDAY SUPPER

EDITH JAMES was a religious woman, and her God was a jealous God. On Sundays, wet or fine, she attended alternately mattins and evensong, and once a fortnight she received the Holy Sacrament, all in the flinty modern parish church of Saint Jude. Julian said that it was suppressed sex, and Phyl got angry, firing up and muttering something about people who were slaves to their freedom, which Julian didn't catch. He continued to say that it was suppressed sex, especially on the evensong Sundays, when he was obliged to take Miss James's place at supper at The Elms.

Sunday supper at The Elms had been, ever since he could remember it, a deplorable meal. Cold, underdone beef, accompanied in summer by the small mercy of a watery salad, and in winter by pickles and baked potatoes, was followed by stewed fruit in its seasons, and prunes or tinned peaches in mid-winter, Bird's custard, and biscuits and cheese. The biscuits were kept in an electro-plated biscuit barrel on the sideboard, and were always soft, and the cheese—half-a-pound of discreetly unripe Gorgonzola—was always hard and dry. To

an old man, who had taken no exercise all day, violent indigestion was not unnaturally the result, and for the rest of the evening George Prebble would sit hunched up before the fire, suffering, and thinking of Queenie Waters, and how she had never thought it impious or too much trouble to tie a lacey apron round her ample person and bustle away into the kitchenette to make up something nice and tasty for her George. One Sunday night last summer, when Julian had been on holiday, Eric had come down to supper, and he had said : " My hat ! what a meal ! " and had gone down to the kitchen and, ignoring the sulky parlourmaid, had cooked a little white soup and an omelette, and carried it up, looking for all the world like his mother, so pink and white and golden-haired and kind. There had been the devil to pay next day. The milk for the servants' early morning tea had gone into the white soup, and the breakfast eggs into the omelette ; the cook and the parlourmaid gave notice, and never again would Miss James go out in the evening when Julian was away.

The joint was particularly underdone to-night. The jar of pickles was almost finished, and someone had picked out all the gherkins. There was rhubarb, which Julian liked, but he had had it at lunch. The biscuits were uneatable.

" Why doesn't Miss James have the biscuits put in the oven if she must let them get soft ? " enquired Julian.

" She doesn't take cheese," his father told him.

" Your mother didn't, either. The biscuits have always been soft in this house."

" You should complain, Father," said Julian. He didn't understand that nothing was worth complaining about, and that it merely irritated his father to be told what he should do.

" I'm all right," muttered George Prebble vindictively. " You look after yourself, Julian, and leave me alone. Set your own house in order. How's your wife ? Let me see, what's her name ? "

" Phyl's all right, thank you. A bit in need of a holiday, I'm afraid."

" And you've got some children, haven't you ? What are they, boys or girls ? "

" Boys."

" That's right," observed George Prebble blandly. " Girls are no use. They marry and then they have another name. None of the Prebbles ever have any girls. How many boys have you, Julian ? "

" Two," said Julian. " John and Michael. Surely you remember that, Father." He knew very well that no effort on the old man's part could control or check the degeneration of his brain, but it was exasperating to have to answer such foolish questions when his father could talk quite coherently if it were a matter of refusing him money or scoring off him.

" I can't remember everything," said George Prebble testily. " I've had a full life, very different from what you call life nowadays. I've got something better to remember than the names and ages of your sons."

"I daresay you have," said Julian, bored to tears, getting up from the table still hungry and extraordinarily uncomfortable inside. "I think I'll go into the garden and have a walk for a minute or two. I've got a touch of indigestion. They say the worst thing you can do is to sit down."

He helped his father into the morning-room, and then he went out, across the hall and down a few steps to a shabby, little, unheated conservatory which led to the lawn. In his mother's time this conservatory had been full of hardy ferns, but the ferns had been dead twenty years or more; a few dusty ornamental bowls, intended for bulbs, stood on the shelves still, and under the shelves was a stack of earthenware pots, some old tins, a few broken garden tools, and the remains of a deck chair. The place was never spring-cleaned, because the servants called it the conservatory, and thought of it as the gardener's province, while the jobbing gardener, who cut the grass and bedded out geraniums, brought his own tools with him, and never thought of entering the house.

Julian went through into the garden.

It was a wet night, but the rain had ceased for the moment, and he walked briskly along the gravel path which encircled the lawn. The garden, for a suburban one, was large, but it was extravagantly laid out in two lawns, on which towered healthy but lugubrious conifers, and vast, dark shrubberies of laurel and straggling yew. At the foot of the iron verandah there was an old-fashioned

rockery covered by periwinkle and St. John's wort, and the two borders cut in the grass were invariably bedded out with geraniums, calcelarias, lobelia and marguerites. There were no other flowers except a cluster of bluebells, which grew among some clinkers in front of the shrubbery.

Julian walked round the garden thinking that he couldn't stand another Sunday supper at The Elms. The food was filthy, his father was always rude to him, and his increasing imbecility was painful to Julian's civilized, masculine mind. Death to Julian was quite conventional, an occasion for tail-coats and floral tributes, something respectable enough to be mentioned daily in the *Times*. But mental decay wasn't. You had to find an euphemism ; " My father's an invalid," Julian would say. Why didn't tail-coated death come and end the horror, and end all his own difficulties too, tuck imbecility and insults and Sunday suppers at The Elms and poverty and Phyl's grievances all neatly away under an honourable and admirable white marble tombstone in Putney Vale ?

It began to r in, only spots at first, and Julian turned down a path which wound into the shrubbery. He stood there for a moment smoking, but the rain came on harder and, falling on the long, smooth leaves of the laurels, it sounded worse than it was. He wasn't a muff, but he didn't want to get his suit wet, so he made a bolt for the house, sprinting across the lawn to the conservatory door and feeling a boy again. But the sprint didn't cure his indigestion ; to save his life he couldn't

go and sit in the morning room. He left the conservatory door open and stood just inside, listening to the rustle of the rain on the leaves and approving it as a nice warm rain that would do the garden good, not that there's much in this garden to be done good to, he thought angrily, for he loved gardens ; and he looked round the conservatory and thought how useful it might have been for raising carnation cuttings and seedlings, and how neglected it was. He remembered it with the ferns in it ; well, of course, he thought, we laugh at ferns now, but in those days they were the things to have, and anyhow the place looked tidy and green. He remembered his mother watering the ferns with a small red can, and all at once his glance rested on the selfsame can, upside down, cobwebs swathing it, among the stacked pots and the old tins under the shelf. He had loved his mother, and now he bent down with the little, middle-aged grunt that was becoming habitual to him, and picked up her can and set it in a more honourable position among the ornamental bowls on the shelf. Perhaps there are other things I remember, he thought, and looked round. He didn't remember any of the bulb bowls ; they had probably been Christmas presents to his father from Phyl or even from himself, but one didn't remember things seen now as one remembered things seen in childhood, photographed on the clean plate of a child's mind. Under the shelf, however, there were old tins of paint—he turned them over with his foot. *Emerald green ;* he could remember painting the

garden seats with that, one year. And a bottle of turpentine ; he had bought that for thinning the emerald green, up at the oil shop in the High Street. And a tin of Abol, empty, or he might have used it up on his own roses. And a tin of weed-killer, three-quarters empty and with the lid off. Oh, lord ! he thought, it's not very sensible to leave that knocking round. He stooped down again and picked it up. The powder was caked and covered with dust. It doesn't look very deadly now, he thought. He took out his penknife and scraped a little of the stuff together—just for the thrill of holding death there—into the palm of his hand. He had never bought any weed-killer himself ; weeds made but a rare appearance in the more urban locality of Canberry Gardens ; the trouble was blight ; and he had the average good citizen's liking for a murder mystery safely and agreeably presented to him by the daily press. The powder in his palm suggested to him, rather than horticultural neatness, the murderer's weapon ; and he stood looking at it, awed by the significance of those few dusty grains. Pop them into a fellow's tea, he thought, and he'd be done for ; just through swallowing a grain or two, he wouldn't eat nor drink nor work nor take his pleasure any more. When Julian thought of death, it wasn't " some white tremendous daybreak," or any rot like that ; it was going out of a warm, crowded room into cold darkness and ceasing utterly with the click of the door. Still, there are worse things than death, he thought—cancer of the tongue

and blindness, and this softening of the brain that Father's got. I wonder he's never thought of doing away with himself. And who could blame him if he did ? thought Julian, certainly not I ; and he remembered reading in a novel how a girl threatened with homicidal mania had induced her friend to administer to her an overdose of some narcotic. Supposing his father asked that of him ; would he refuse ? He hoped not. He wasn't a religious man ; he had been through the War ; and he couldn't regard as sacred life often so frivolously begotten and for four years gun-fodder. La Fontaine's sad lines came into his mind. They're true, he thought ; what's a man but '*one insect the more, born of the heat, to hum beneath this lovely sky* ? ' To crush a suffering insect, to knock on the head a mutilated rabbit, that's mercy. Still, there's no use in wasting thought on it. Father's not in the least likely to ask anything of the sort. If he were suffering the tortures of the damned, he would still take a malicious delight in outlasting me.

With a sigh Julian crooked his palm and shook the powder back into the tin. I must tell Miss James to have the stuff thrown away, he thought, as he replaced the tin among the rubbish under the shelf and his penknife in his trouser pocket. Then, straightening his shoulders and pulling down his waistcoat, he strolled across the hall into the morning-room.

" Got rid of your stomach-ache ? " asked George Wellesley Prebble.

" It was a twinge of indigestion," replied Julian with dignity. " Cold meat."

" When I was your age," said his father, grinning, " it took more than a couple of slices of cold beef to upset *me*. If Sunday supper at home gives you a stomach-ache, a night like some *I* used to have would half kill *you*. What's the time ? "

" Twenty-to-nine."

" You're a soft lot nowadays. As soft as putty, that's what you are. Look at the newspapers ! Nothing but peace talk ! And no kissing allowed in the Park, and the public-houses closed half the day ! Can't fight nor drink nor kiss your girl ! No wonder you're losing this war with Germany."

" But, Father, the War's been over ten years now " . . .

George Prebble turned round and glared at him.

" Don't you be always putting people right, my lad ! If you live to be a hundred, you won't know as much about the world as I knew when I was twenty-five. So keep your information to yourself, please. What's the time ? "

" Fourteen minutes to nine. Shall I read you something from the *Observer* ? " said Julian, sorely tried.

" No, thank you. I've read all I want to read."

Silence fell on the morning-room at The Elms. The old man leaned forward and drew his chair an inch or two nearer to the fire. It was warm and bright, exquisitely bright in the pale mists of his failing eyesight, exquisitely warm to the thin

blood in his veins. Better than food or drink it was, and they were good enough ; at eighty, he thought, I enjoy life more than that stick, Julian. And I can score off him too, he thought ; I've wits enough for that. And he chuckled and leaned closer to the fire.

Julian picked up the *Observer* and, without unfolding it, read the publisher's advertisements and Gerald Gould's review of *Domino*. Now and then he offered a comment. " Our authoress, Miss Bechler, is catching it from the reviewers," and " Longman's had a winner in *The Bridge of St. Luis Rey*." His father grunted, and after a moment or two said, " What's that you said just now, Julian ? " When Julian repeated his remark, the only answer he got for his pains was another grunt. So the evening wore on.

At a quarter to ten the door opened, and the parlourmaid came in. She was a quarrelsome woman who found life intolerable without a grievance, and, as she set down a cup of Ovaltine on the corner of the writing table, her eyes searched the room for some irregularity, a newspaper on the floor, a spent match on the hearthrug, of which she could complain to Miss James next day. But nothing was out of place, and, unappeased, she left the room.

As the door closed, Julian looked up from the newspaper and saw the steaming cup of Ovaltine.

An isolated thought came into his mind : it would be child's play to stretch out his arm behind

the old man's back and sprinkle in the cup a few grains from the dusty tin beneath the conservatory shelf.

He was horrified.

" Father," he said, gently, " there's your Ovaltine."

" I know it is," said George Prebble. " I'm not so deaf that I can't hear that woman lumbering about."

That's the sort of thing, thought Julian; all his petty rudeness and insults, all his injustices. I'm not to blame. They're enough to give the best of men a murderer's thoughts. And life. All worry and sordid little things. Bills and Phyl snivelling. Never anything beautiful nor exciting. I've been cheated, thought Julian, and he's cheated me, bringing me into the world for his own pleasure, and then refusing to do anything for me. He's been a bad man if there ever was one, a bad husband and a bad father, and most probably an unscrupulous business man; and it's all wrong that he should have power over a man like me. I'm not a saint, thought Julian, but I'm a moral man, and he thought of his long marital fidelity, and of his justice and many acts of kindness to his sons.

" I could do with some of that stuff now," said George Prebble.

So Julian rose and handed him the cup and watched him drink, looking down on the small, shrivelled body and thinking: those weren't a murderer's thoughts; why, it's half pity that I feel, half pity and half a healthy man's shrinking

from disease of body or mind. If I gave him the arsenic, he'd suffer very little ; just a few hours' sickness, nothing to what he'll suffer if nature takes her way. And then, in the morning, it would be over, the decadent processes cut short, the pain and discomfort evaded ; and Miss James could be dismissed, and this horrible house sold, and the whole thing forgotten. I've always been a compassionate sort of a fellow, thought Julian ; it's because I've imagination ; I can imagine what other people are feeling, and so I feel with them ; and he remembered his sympathy for Phyl when her babies were born, how he had sat beside her holding her hand and reminding her that childbirth was a perfectly natural process, and that native women think nothing of it, although his anxiety was such that he really suffered far more than she.

" Put it down. I can't hold it for ever," said George Prebble, holding out his empty cup.

Julian obeyed. As he sat down again, he heard the light scrunching of footsteps on the mossy gravel of the drive, and a moment later the door of the smoking-room opened softly to admit the spare torso of Miss James. She was wearing a black felt hat poised high on her grizzled hair, and an old-fashioned fur stole, the worn head and paws of which hung down over her shoulder, grotesquely suggesting a return from the chase. Her face looked dazed and drunk. She was, in fact, drugged out of all sense and reason by the only beauty that her starved life knew.

" Good evening, Miss James," said Julian.

She pursed her thin lips, nodded to him, and withdrew.

" Well, Miss James is in, Father," said Julian. " So I'll be pushing off now. Shall I give you a hand upstairs before I go ? "

" I don't know that I'm ready yet," said George Prebble. He was, as a matter of fact, tired to death, but he still had enough energy left to wish to annoy Julian. " You're just like your mother," he said scornfully. " She was always one for early hours."

" Doctor Hornburn advised you to get plenty of sleep, Father."

" Hornburn's an old woman. If it wasn't that I've always known his father, I wouldn't have him in the house." His disapproval transferred to the doctor, he forgot his purpose of annoying Julian, and rose and took his arm. " All soft-soap and Latin names," he grumbled as he dragged upstairs. " Only fit to attend to hysterical women, like most of the doctors to-day."

Julian helped him up to the landing and opened his bedroom door. Then he said good-night, and hurried downstairs, turning off the electric lights as he went. The morning-room door stood open. He switched off the light there, receiving as he did so an instantaneous and abnormally sharp ocular impression of the frowsty room and the worn leather armchair drawn up to the dying coal fire and the stained cup and saucer where he had placed them on the edge of the writing desk. But

when he had shut the front door behind him and was out of the house and in the night air, it seemed to him that he had carried away with him neither that impression nor any responsibility for the extraordinary thoughts that had filled his mind during the past hour. " The usual boring evening," he told his wife, and yawned.

CHAPTER IV

AN EVERYDAY MATTER

YET, during the days that followed, those thoughts and that impression were constantly in his mind.

When he received the final notice from the gas company and a threat to disconnect the telephone; when Phyl sat in the drawing-room doing something rather hopeless to last year's hat; when Cynthia Bechler brought the manuscript of *Nor Devil nor Spaniard* into his office and lingered at the door saying it would be a long time before she worried him again; on Sunday; on Quarter Day; that easy solution to all his difficulties and limitations suggested itself not as a secret and shameful temptation, an occasion for a struggle of conscience or a better self, but as a clear and reasonable possibility. A traditionalist, a conventionalist, brought up to accept, defend and extol the muddles, illusions and misapprehensions of centuries of the erring and wretched life of man, he had never been an honest thinker; all his life he had said to himself, that's wrong, that's mean, that's bad, and had turned his back and known himself to be a moral man. So that now he could justify himself. Again and again he told

himself: it would be for Father's own good; if he were in his right mind and knew what was happening to him, he would beg me to do it; and just consider the trouble and unhappiness I should save all round. At the end of a few days he began to regard himself as a public benefactor, reckoning up all those who would benefit by his act, even to his half-brother who would be obliged for the first time in his life to earn an honest living, and the families which, when The Elms was sold and probably demolished, might occupy Council houses on the estate. I mustn't allow my personal fears and feelings to influence me, he told himself presently; even to consider the risk of detection would be weakness. He did, however, consider it. His conclusion was that those murders which come out are rarely, if ever, planned by educated men; and, he thought, even should anything be suspected, who on earth would dream of suspecting me? Perfectly self-satisfied, he had never felt the smallest inclination to self-criticism or analysis, but he began now to glance at his passing silhouette in shop windows and to attempt to discover, from the bearing of people he spoke to, their impressions of him. The result was reassuring. His thickening figure, heavy profile and straight briar pipe made as honest and British an outline as Mr. Baldwin's; his acquaintances slapped him on the back and spoke heartily of Rugby football and the Government. Once in his office, during the pause for tea, a poisoning case was discussed. "No pipe-smoker ever did a murder," stated Walter Bailey,

and one of the chief contributors to Messrs. Curtis, Fayre and Haydon's two shilling crime series remarked, " You can't tell anything from the newspaper reports. You've got to be in court and see these fellows. Anyone who's studied criminology can tell at once." " From the face ? " asked Julian. " Face, figure, voice, gestures, everything." " Then appearances aren't deceptive ? " " Good lord, no ! No more than second thoughts are best." And at home Phyl said, " Now the boys eat so much, Julian, I really can't manage, whatever I do. If it was only five shillings a week more ! " And John said " Thompson *major's* father has bought a new Alvis. Why can't we have a car, even if it's only a third-hand Ford ? " And Michael said, " Are John and me going to Rugby, Daddy, like you ? "

During the next week, Julian planned.

He'd have to get rid of the tin, and, unfortunately, it was a largish one. But supposing there *were* enquiries, it was certain to be discovered, and its presence in the conservatory would focuss suspicion on the household and regular visitors. Well, he rarely left the house before Miss James had gone up to her bedroom, and, ten to one, thanks to the wretched English climate, he would be wearing his Burberry. After helping his father upstairs, he could go quietly into the conservatory and, with the tin hidden under the loose folds of the Raglan waterproof, walk out of the house in his usual way. But then ? Shove the thing down one of the rabbit-holes on the Common or cast it

into the waters of the mere? The spring nights were dark, thank God, but you might bump into someone on the Common; lovers went there; it was a scandal, so people said. Take it home with him and throw it in the dustbin? The dustmen might notice it as they tilted the contents of "Lochaber's" bin into the bright, disgusting harlequinade of their cart; or Phyl might "go through" the dustbin, as she did quite often when things were lost and she suspected herself of having swept them up by mistake. It would be best, on his way home down the hill, to drop the tin over one of the long, split-oak fences into a clump of laurel or rhododendron, where it might lie for years. The garden of "Hill Crest" was one which he would pass, the home of Sir Alan Derwent, Member of Parliament for the Borough, and that would be particularly suitable, because the Derwents' family was grown-up, not likely to go ferreting round in laurel bushes, as children might. And Ridgemount Hill was a long, straight road, seldom frequented, where you would be able to make quite sure that you were not observed. Julian thought complacently: being a man of imagination, I'm able to foresee and forestall all these details.

Then there was the question of the dose. That troubled him. Too small an amount might fail in its purpose; too much might lend to the Ovaltine an unpleasant, even a suspicious taste. One day, in the luncheon hour, he consulted the encyclopedia in Walter Bailey's room, learned the fatal

dose, worked out the proportion. Good heavens! how simple it was! What a small, facile step from life to death! Not much more difficult nor important than killing a fly, thought Julian, just *' one insect the more . . .'*

" It's Miss James's evening out next Sunday," said Phyl.

She liked those evenings. With Julian in the house till seven, the boys went off to bed without giving any trouble, and, having no supper to set or clear away, she would go upstairs early and prepare a hot, deep, fragrant bath in which she would lie for a long time, soothed, rested and content. And sometimes she would leave off planning for Monday and plan further ahead, plan the wet October evening when Michael would go up to Oxford, or, in fancy, watch John score a try for England on a darkening Twickenham afternoon. But, even then, it was for her boys that she planned. At thirty-three she saw no future of her own.

" Damn Miss James," said Julian as usual. " What she wants to go out for, only God knows."

On Saturday night he began to worry, not because of any stir of conscience or sudden glimpse of truth, but for the success of his enterprise. It was not unknown for his father to wave away the Ovaltine and, in defiance of doctor's orders, to call for a whisky-and-soda, or only to drink half the cupful, and that would be most awkward of all, for half the dose of arsenic would mean sickness, and the cook was a slut ; the cup might stand for hours in the kitchen before it was emptied

and washed, and Hornburn might diagnose food poisoning and go nosing round. Difficulties always seem worse at night, thought Julian, coming out from the bathroom, dropping his toothbrush into its stand, clumping his shoes down in the passage, his braces flipping the linoleum. But, thank God, I'm alone in this, and, if they seem unsurmountable in the light of morning, I can give it up or take more time to think it over. He slept soundly. He was a man who rarely dreamed. And sure enough, in the morning, the whole thing seemed plain sailing, and he took the boys for a walk along the path by the railway, forked up those bulbs which had finished flowering, planted out some wallflowers, and rolled the lawn in his usual atrophic Sunday calm. Only as he heard from the garden the chink of washing-up in the scullery and thought, well, Phyl won't have to do that much longer, he felt extraordinarily pleased, for, though he wasn't in love with her, and didn't particularly want her to be happy, she was his wife, and he didn't want his wife to be a drudge any more than he wanted his clothes to be shabby or his sons labourers.

"It's seven o'clock, Julian!" Phyl called over the banisters.

"All right," said that excellent father. "I'll have a wash and then I'll come up and say goodnight to the boys."

Michael was in bed. He hadn't much to say to his father; the trains they had watched together that morning had been Power and Strength to

the boy, and the Southern Railway's inadequate Sunday service to the man. They had no common ground. However, Julian knew his duty to Michael, so he sat down on his bed, and said that if Michael didn't get any more detentions before the end of term, he'd take him to watch the trains at Clapham Junction in the holidays. Michael, a fortnight of term still before him, said, " Thank you, Daddy," in a polite, unhopeful voice. Michael's got no enthusiasm, thought Julian, and said good-night and went into the bathroom to see John.

John had his face in the water. He was practising opening his eyes under water, and, when his father entered, he lifted his dripping face and said, " Shall we be able to go to the sea in the summer holidays ? " Julian couldn't resist the temptation to bring a smile to the eager and beloved face. " I hope so," he said. " I think so, John. I'm nearly sure." John cheered immoderately, and Phyl looked round the bathroom door and said, " What a noise ! " " Oh, Mummie, Daddy says we're going to the sea this year," shrieked John, and Phyl frowned at Julian and whispered, " Julian ! What a shame ! " Julian hated her for her frown and her despondent attitude, and he said, " Well, good-bye, old John," and went straight down into the hall.

It was not a pleasant evening. The sun had shone during the day, but now the sky was cloudy and a cold, dry wind was blowing from the east. It was, however, a perfectly ordinary March

evening ; no sinister thunder-clouds rolled above Canberry Gardens, no blood-red sunset stained the western sky ; heartless nature provided no backcloth for the drama of her son. In spite of the cold wind and deepening twilight, birds sang sweetly in the gardens ; all along Canberry Gardens, in the lighted dolls' houses, children's voices called good-night. Julian too, setting out to murder his father, felt perfectly ordinary. For a few moments that surprised him ; he didn't know that there isn't any drama except for the spectators. Then he thought : well, death's perfectly ordinary, an everyday matter, and he tried to remember the death rate and reckon exactly how everyday it was. Then he thought, killing's an everyday matter too, not only flies and moths and earwigs, but lusty young bullocks and soft little calves and woolly lambs ; and he thought of his father's shrivelled body without compunction ; " *one insect the more . . .* " He was thinking of an absurd tip he'd been given for the Derby—a horse he'd never heard of called Trigo—as he walked up the hill.

George Wellesley Prebble was in an agreeable mood that night. His tailor had sent him his new suit on Saturday evening. Living as he did, his clothes wore out very slowly, and he had not bought anything new for several years. In the hope that Eric would come down to see it, he had put it on that morning, and Eric had come, and had noticed it instantly, slapping his father on the back and saying that half the men in the profession

would give their souls for a waist like his, and that, by Jove, he must have been a bright boy in his day. George Prebble, feeling ten years younger, and grateful for it, had asked how Eric was rubbing along, and hoped that he would always come to his old father in any difficulty; to which Eric had replied that of course he would, because there'd never been a more generous father, and that already he'd accepted far too much. So, besides feeling ten years younger and grateful, George Prebble was feeling generous and fatherly, and he was sitting by the fire smiling, ready to have his suit admired again, when Julian came in.

But Julian said nothing about the suit, nothing at all. He said that it was cold outside, and that the wind was in the east, and that it blew like snow. He told his father one or two facts about meteorology. At Julian's age, the weather hadn't troubled George Prebble, though autumn had turned his thoughts to pink and white cosiness, and spring had made his blood run like wine. Nowadays, whether the wind was in the east or in the west, he was cold, and the world was cold too, with a burnt-out, silvery coldness like the moon's. He made no reply to Julian's remarks, but began to tell him a story which Eric had brought with him. Sitting there, in a new suit with a waist that half the men in the profession would give their souls for, and telling a dirty story, he hoped to shock Julian and to prove himself more of a man of the world than his son. But, quite suddenly, the purport of the story

began to slip away from him; his intelligence reached out to catch it; but it dissolved into the grey mists that rose and writhed and floated at the back of his mind. He stammered and fell into a chagrined silence. Julian said, "It sounds like a good story," with heavy, irritating tact.

"Don't be a fool," said George Prebble. "You didn't hear half of it. How can you tell?"

They sat down to supper. Cold beef again, but a newish jar of pickles and plenty of gherkins, no rhubarb to-night when, not having had it at lunch Julian would have welcomed it, but stewed pears from a tin and a cold, rice shape, then the biscuits and butter and gorgonzola cheese.

"Got indigestion to-night?" asked George Prebble.

"I don't know. I'll take a turn in the garden, anyway."

He went straight out through the conservatory and walked round the garden, for his father might speak of it, and he hated telling lies. Then he went back into the conservatory, closed the door behind him, and looked round. His mother's little red watering can still stood on the shelf to which he had moved it a fortnight ago, and his sudden fear that Miss James had at last taken it into her head to have the place spring-cleaned was reassured by a glance under the shelf; the shabby tin lay among the others, just as he had left it. He stooped with his little grunt and picked it up, careful not to disarrange the rest of the rubbish or the dust that covered it. He set the tin down

on the shelf while he pulled his penknife and an empty match-box from his pockets. With the small blade of his penknife he scraped into the match-box enough and to spare of the caked powder in the tin. Then he shut the match-box and placed it carefully in his coat pocket, and shut his knife and restored it to his trouser pocket. The tin he replaced under the shelf, not in its old place, but nearer to the house door.

" You haven't been long," said George Wellesley Prebble.

" No," said Julian. " I'm all right to-night."

And he sat down to his boring evening with a sigh.

At a quarter to ten the door opened, and the parlour-maid came in. On the corner of the writing-table she set down a cup of Ovaltine. Her glance went round the room before she closed the door.

When Julian heard the door close, he put his hand into his coat pocket and grasped the match-box. Then he got up and walked across the room to the writing-table. With his back to his father, he took out the match-box, opened it, and sprinkled a pinch of powder in the Ovaltine. Then he returned the match-box to his pocket, covering it with his hand. " Father," he said, turning round to offer the cup and saucer, " here's your Ovaltine."

" I don't want it," said George Prebble.

Julian's heart seemed to miss a beat. He nearly said, " You *must* have it. It's doctor's orders," but he checked himself in time. " I'll put it down

on the little table beside you, then," he said gently. " Perhaps you'll fancy it later on."

George Prebble didn't answer, but when Julian had put the cup down, he picked it up and began to stir it. The stairs down to the basement were on the opposite side of the hall to the living rooms, and the kitchen was as far as Victorian stupidity could place it from the foot of the stairs, so that nothing came very hot to the dinner table or the morning room. When George Prebble had stirred his Ovaltine for a moment, he was able to drink it, and Julian, seeing the cup tilt, thought, suddenly and horribly, he's done for ! and then, as quickly as he could, consoling the horror, he won't suffer any more." Nevertheless it was incredible, fantastic, that death could have inhabited that smug, domestic cup, that George Wellesley Prebble, founder of Prebble, Game and Hitchcock, a printing firm still doing good business in Farringdon Street, sitting in a leather armchair in the morning-room of his freehold residence, The Elms, wiping from his dry, old lips drops of the beneficial beverage, should already have started on that long, dark journey which we must all travel, but, please God, not until the last possible moment, expedited by the hand of no evil-doer but of Julian Prebble, Mr. Julian Prebble, of the well-known publishing firm of Curtis, Fayre and Haydon, and his only legitimate son. Nothing will happen, thought Julian. How could it ? This isn't Sax Rohmer, it's Sunday evening at The Elms. He'll wake up to-morrow, just as usual.

Footsteps scrunched the gravel. " That sounds like Miss James," he said.

" And quite time, too," said George Prebble. " God knows why I should have to sit up till that old she-cat chooses to come in off the tiles."

Julian frowned. He hated to hear anyone speak disrespectfully of a woman.

" Miss James is always very punctual," he said. " And I don't think you ever really feel inclined to turn in before ten."

" What's the time ? " said George Prebble.

" Five minutes to ten."

" Well, I feel inclined to turn in, as you call it, now."

" Very well." Julian rose, and, with his hand under the old man's elbow, helped him to his feet. They were at the foot of the staircase when Miss James came in. She stood on the mat clasping her prayer-book and umbrella and lifting her white, dazed face to watch them ascend.

God damn the woman, thought Julian. When I go downstairs, she'll hang round to let me out. There'll be no getting to the conservatory. His brain worked quickly. Whatever father thinks, I must contrive to stop upstairs.

He switched on the light in his father's bedroom. " How's your window behaving nowadays, Father ? " he said. " I remember some time ago you spoke about it rattling. And in these spring winds . . . " He walked across the room, drew back one of the curtains and inspected the pitch-pine window-sash.

George Prebble had used this bedroom ever since the influenza epidemic of eighteen-hundred-and-ninety-five had furnished him with an opportunity to break, without explanation, his former custom of sleeping with his wife. It was not the best bedroom in the house—that had been Margaret Prebble's, and had stood empty and shrouded in dust-sheets since her death—but it was a large enough room, overlooking the front door and the drive, and furnished to the taste of a middle-class matron of the eighties. The floor was covered by a seamed Axminster carpet on which a free-growing foliage of yellow-brown swept luxuriantly across a background of navy-blue ; the sateen eiderdown on the bed bore a Paisley pattern in two tones of sage-green ; the curtains were of terra-cotta-coloured serge. The furniture was fumed oak, and Art was represented by two large engravings of plethoric Highland bulls gazing ferociously out from faded rosebud walls.

George Prebble sat down on the Paisley eiderdown. " The window's all right," he said breathlessly. " It was Miss James who complained about them. It takes more than a rattling window to disturb me."

" A window wedge or two would put them absolutely right," said Julian.

" I don't want them put right," snapped his father. " As far as I'm concerned, they're all right now. James can mind her own bloody business and wedge her own windows. What's the time ? "

" Five minutes past ten."

"Why don't you go home, then? You'll catch it from your wife. She'll think you've been flirting with Edith or Miss James."

Julian didn't deign to reply. He drew the curtain carefully and twitched it into position. As he did so, he heard Miss James come upstairs.

"Well, I'll be off, anyhow. Good-night, Father. I daresay I'll be in to-morrow or the next day."

Miss James's bedroom door closed. He waited for his father to say good-night. Then he went out.

He went down the stairs slowly and softly. He didn't want Miss James to hear him. If she did, she might poke her head out of her door to say how well Mr. Prebble was looking, or when would Mr. Julian be in again? To give her time to get some of her clothes off, he went into the morning-room and switched off the light before struggling into his Burberry and picking up his Homburg hat. Then he walked across the hall to the conservatory, assuming a firm tread, for it had just occurred to him that, if anyone heard him, he could very well explain that he had gone to the conservatory to make sure that the door into the garden was properly locked. He picked up the tin of weed-killer, pushed it under his Burberry, where he held it firmly against his side by the pressure of his left arm. Now he had only to cross the hall, open the front door, let down the latch, switch off the hall light and slam the door. He was out in the drive with a sigh of no greater

relief that he had felt at the end of hundreds of Sunday evenings at The Elms.

It was very cold. But he didn't feel it. He felt warm and pleased with himself—why, he didn't know. For he didn't feel that he had accomplished anything, that to-morrow all the worries and difficulties that spoiled his life would be at an end. His satisfaction was purely sub-conscious, the effect of excitement on a nature rarely moved. He went striding down the drive with a springy step; his perceptions seemed sharpened to the keenness of the cold wind and the clear moon. Usually unobservant, he noticed that in the moonlight the gravel of the footpath looked like silver paper from a chocolate-box, and the shadows of the leaves above it like edged tools. Where the shadows thickened into a mass, blotting out the silver paper, he came to the shrubberies of "Hill Crest," and, after a careful survey of the deserted road, he pulled out the tin from beneath his Burberry and dropped it quietly and quickly over the six foot fence. He heard the crack of a twig, an earthy thud, then silence, and the thing was gone. Quite suddenly his satisfaction left him; his mood changed. What have I done? What have I done? shrieked his mind. He took some sort of grip on it. His lifetime's scorn of hysteria helped him. Most likely I've done nothing, he told himself, and realised that it did indeed seem impossible that he, Julian Prebble, should have the power to snuff out a life as though he were a god. The stuff's probably been knocking round for years

and lost its potency, he thought. To-morrow morning I shall wake up and go to the office and the day will pass, and on my way home, I shall look in at The Elms and find father in the morning-room, in his chair. Conquering a strange reluctance to leave his weapon out there, where he couldn't keep an eye on it, among the possibilities and coincidences of a chancey world, he went on down the hill, stepping out less jauntily but quite confidently ; feeling just as usual ; sure that he had failed. Now the oak fence of " Hill Crest " ended ; he crossed the road and turned right into Clifford Grove, walking a hundred yards between the small, friendly houses—painted iron railings instead of sombre oak fences, borders instead of shrubberies, street lamps goldly outshining the silver of the moon. He turned into Canberry Gardens, passed Number Two, the corner house called " Canberry Lodge," where the women with the infernal yapping Yorkshire terriers lived ; Number Four, " Clovelly," there were a couple of kids there, and Phyl had palled-up in the street, in that tiresome way she had, and had taken John and Michael to tea ; Number Six, " Langdale," where the Ritchies lived, he wasn't a public school fellow, and she'd a twang you could cut with a knife, but their daughter designed jackets for novels, and sometimes the three of them would come in after dinner for a chat ; and Number Eight, " Mon Repos," those unspeakable people with their blasted gramophone ! Now he was home. He let himself into the house, into the familiar

hall with the shabby walls, shabby floor, oak chest, framed set of early Oxford Almanacks, Pilgrim in his basket, knowing his master's footsteps, wagging his tail, his eyes pleased and his head between his paws, everything as usual—the mark on the distemper that the boys made with their hands coming downstairs; the dent on the banisters where Michael had knocked out a first tooth; the frayed edge of the stair-carpet where Pilgrim, as a puppy, had gnawed it; the hole in the linoleum where the pram had stood—tiny records of the life of a family, commonplace, insignificant, dull. Impossible that the master of this house had dealt fantastic death!

He went upstairs.

'Well, how did you get on?" asked sleepy Phyl.

"The usual boring evening," said Julian, and yawned.

CHAPTER V

MORNING

" ' *There ain't much sense*
Sittin' on a fence
All by yerself in the moonlight ! ' "

Like a butterfly from a chrysalis, from dark, insensate sleep, Julian's mind struggled into consciousness, first of light, then of life, then of John's tuneless voice.

" ' *There ain't much thrill,*
By the water mill,
All by yerself in the moonlight ! ' "

Where on earth did the boys pick up these songs ?

" John ! John ! John ! "

" What ? "

" Don't say ' what ? ' like that. It's rude. Have you cleaned your teeth ? "

" Oh, dash ! " Julian heard John burst guiltily from his bedroom and scurry across the landing to the bath-room ; then Phyl's voice again.

" Oh, John, where's your dressing-gown ? As if I hadn't enough to do with the breakfast without worrying over a big boy like you ! "

"Oh, shut up," muttered Julian, turning over and pulling the bed-clothes round his ears. Monday morning was bad enough without being wakened by a nagging voice.

Phyl came into the room. She was carrying a cup of tea on a shabby little green tray. She was dressed, wearing a warm brown sweater, a brown skirt which had originally been pleated, but it was old, and she had washed it, and the fullness stood out now in clumsy folds. Her hair was not yet combed.

"Tea, Julian."

Julian threw back the bed-clothes, sat up and scratched his head. It's Monday morning, he thought, and it's raining, and last night I put that stuff in father's Ovaltine.

He stretched out his hand and took the cup and saucer from the tray. There was tea slopped in the saucer, a thing he detested. He frowned and made a noise with his tongue: "Tch, tch." Phyl put the tray down on her own crumpled bed, and powdered her nose in a listless, mechanical way.

Julian drank his tea, sip by sip. Had he poisoned his father, or was it all a ghastly dream? No, he thought, I never dream; besides, the whole of last night seems absolutely real. And not ghastly at all, he discovered, as the warm, stimulating liquid ran down into his empty stomach, restoring his self-confidence, making a man of him; but, on the contrary, sane, sensible, commonplace—don't old men die every minute?—and adding

interest and anticipation to at least one Monday morning in the year.

He held out his empty cup.

" Finished ? " asked Phyl, drawing a comb through her hair.

" Yes. Going to get up."

She took his cup from him ; and he got out of bed and pulled on his Jaegar slippers and dressing-gown. Phyl began to strip the beds, for there were boiled eggs this morning, and it was no use putting the water on to boil until Julian came out of the bathroom. She stripped Julian's bed and turned the mattress over ; but from her own she merely pulled back the upper layer of clothes. She had done that, and had picked up the cup and saucer and the tray to take them downstairs with her, when the telephone bell rang. Julian had had the telephone installed three years ago at the time of his father's stroke and subsequent illness ; and Phyl's nervous thoughts turned to her father-in-law now.

Julian had shaved and was in his bath. He had not begun to soap himself, but, when he heard the telephone bell ring, he washed the lather off his face and pulled himself up to a standing position. His ears were straining, his heart thumped, and, realising that, he despised himself, for he despised excitement and emotion, the quickened pulse, the taut nerve, and he liked to think of himself as calm, strong, impassive, not highly strung, truly British, one of the quiet, bull-dog, Kipling's " If " sort that won the War. All it can mean is that I've

accomplished what I set out to do, he told himself grandly, and he sat down in the water again and took up the bath-glove and the soap.

Phyl knocked on the bathroom door.

" Miss James is on the 'phone, Julian. She says your father isn't well."

" Good lord ! " How false his voice sounded, but it didn't matter, thank God, before Phyl. " Well, what am I to do ? Does she want to speak to me ? I'm in the bath."

" She's holding on. I think she wants to know whether to send for the doctor."

Julian leaned forward and tightened the hot tap which was dripping in a slow, irritating way.

" Well, what does she think's wrong with him ? "

" He's got a headache, and she says he's been sick. She thinks it's a chill on the liver."

Julian thought rapidly. To call in a doctor at this stage was, it seemed to him, a very sound idea. If sickness and headache were his father's only symptoms, in all probability Hornburn would diagnose a bilious attack, prescribe a little brandy, and take himself off until next day. That would entirely preclude the chance of an inquest, never very great, because his father's health was admittedly precarious, and the doctor was calling regularly at least once a week at The Elms.

" It sounds like a chill," he said steadily. " Father was quite all right last night as far as I could see. Still, I'd like Hornburn to see him. It's not as if he was a younger man."

" All right. I'll tell her."

" And tell her to ask him to call in early, at the beginning of his round. And to be sure and ring me up at the office and let me know what he says."

" All right."

He heard her hurry downstairs as he soaped the bath-glove into a creamy lather and applied it to his neck.

" I don't wonder your father's got a chill," said Phyl at breakfast. " There's a piercing wind coming straight out of the east."

" I'm boiled," said cheerful John.

" I'm frozen," said Michael.

Julian looked with disfavour on his younger son.

" That's because you're always crouching over the fire."

" It isn't. I crouch over the fire because I'm cold," said Michael in his small, contentious voice.

" Don't argue with me," ordered Julian. " Eat your breakfast and hold your tongue." It was from force of habit that he spoke sharply. He felt no annoyance. A suppressed and not disagreeable excitement had shaken him into a holiday mood. All being well, he would not enter this house again except as a man of property, capable of pleasing hints about a car and summer holidays and delightful suggestions of a larger household to make life easy for poor, tired Phyl. He felt genial and protective, a typical father with a treat in store. On

his journey to Bloomsbury, though he read the newspaper as usual, he was all the while conscious of a pleasurable mental glow, akin to that which young people feel on the eve of some long-expected, long-desired event. " I'm expecting a telephone message about ten o'clock," he warned the new office boy. " Be sure to tell the lady to hold on, and come for me." There was a telephone switchboard in the main office, but it was old-fashioned and worked very badly ; neither of the partners ever spoke on the telephone ; Mr. Haydon was too deaf and Sir Curtis considered it undignified ; so neither of them thought that any repairs or alterations could be necessary ; and Julian and Walter Bailey wasted much time and temper in vain endeavours to conduct conversations from their private rooms.

It was half-past nine when Julian arrived. He had barely read through his post when the office boy came in.

" There's a lady on the 'phone, sir."

Julian got up and went across the vestibule to the main office. It was a large, untidy room at the front of the house, immediately below the partners' rooms. The ledger clerks occupied a small room at the back of the house, but the mail was received and sent out here ; callers were interrogated ; all round the room in tall, mahogany cabinets were the files, complete from the year eighteen-hundred-and-thirty-three ; binding orders and printing orders were made out at the desk near the fire by elderly Mr. Brownrigg, and, at a

desk near the window, young Mr. Thomp on toyed carelessly with the spring and autumn lists and the general catalogue.

The telephone stood on the table where Mr. Hallett dealt with the mail. The table was placed as nearly across the door as was possible without blocking it, and Mr. Hallett sat in a revolving chair on the inward side. He was a small, neat man with a dark, bristling moustache and shining pince-nez. An unbounded contempt for authors had affected his manner, which to callers was sharp to the point of ferocity, but to members of the house of Curtis, Fayre & Haydon he was as mild as milk, a docile, conscientious, obliging little man. He had before him on the table a small desk on which lay his letter sheets, neatly cased like a blotter. Beyond the desk was a row of six file trays, labelled respectively, *File*, *Post*, *Mr. Bailey*, *Mr. Prebble*, *Mr. Haydon*, *Sir Curtis*. The telephone stood at Mr. Hallett's right hand.

" Sorry to disturb you,' Mr. Hallett," said Julian, as he leaned across the table and took up the receiver. Old-fashioned manners obtained, rather charmingly, in the firm.

" Not at all, sir," replied Mr. Hallett, mild as milk.

Julian put his ear to the instrument. The main office of Curtis, Fayre & Haydon faded.

" Is that you, Miss James ? "

Miss James's thready voice was clear on the telephone.

" Oh, Mr. Julian, doctor's been. He says it's

a little stomach upset, due to the east wind. He's ordered Mr. Prebble a little brandy and written out a prescription. I've sent Edith along to Mooney's with it now."

" Ah ! He doesn't think it's serious ? "

" No. He's not coming back till first thing to-morrow unless we send for him. But he says that all the same we were quite right to call him in. He says we can't be too careful."

" Oh, well," said Julian, " that's a relief to my mind. Thank you for ringing me up, Miss James. I'll look in on my way home."

So far, so good, he thought, replacing the receiver, and then quite another matter came into his head. " This letter about the half-tone blocks for *A Lifetime in Burma*, Mr. Hallett ; surely I dealt with that when I wrote before . . . "

The day wore through. He didn't worry and he wasn't nervous, didn't start when the door was left open and he could hear the telephone bell ringing in the main office, or suffer from a sinking feeling in his stomach ; but he experienced an overpowering desire to talk of the affair. " I shall probably be getting another message from home," he told Mr. Hallett. " My father's very seedy, I'm afraid." " Tch, tch," said Mr. Hallett. " I'm sorry to hear that, sir. The spring's a trying time for the old folks." " I'm going to get just a snack," he told Walter Bailey, as they went out together. " My poor old father was none too grand this morning, and I don't want to be long away from the telephone." " I'm sorry, Prebble," said sym-

pathetic Bailey. " I know what it is. My mother's very bronchial, and we're on thorns every time the wind goes into the east." " Bring my letters in as you finish them, Miss Bennett," he told the typist. " I shall try and get off early to-night. We've illness at home." Frosty Miss Bennett thawed instantly. " Of course, Mr. Prebble. It's not one of the little boys, I hope ? " " Oh, no. It's my father. Just a chill. But with elderly people . . . " " Yes," said Miss Bennett. " We can't expect to have them always with us, though that doesn't make it any better when the time for parting comes." Their sympathy touched Julian, and his heart warmed towards his kind. It did not occur to him that, had they known the truth, they must as readily have loathed and denounced him ; here in his office, the Turkey carpet on the floor, the Sheraton chairs on either side of the fireplace, Bloomsbury at the window, Sir Curtis and his thoughts of Lord Tennyson in the front room upstairs, everything as usual, the truth was, even to himself, unbelievable, and he thought of himself as they did, of poor Mr. Prebble who was worried about his father, and anxious to get home.

His letters came in for signature before tea, and he signed them, and, while he drank his tea, he discussed with Walter Bailey senile decay and bronchial tubes, and how it was that pneumonia was so often the actual cause of death. " Well, we've had a nice, gloomy conversation," said Bailey, wiping his mouth with a brown silk hand-

kerchief. " I really wanted your advice on a cloth for that wretched book on bee-keeping. But I suppose you'll be slipping off now ? " " I think so. I shouldn't bother much about the bee-keeping. Why not that yellow we had for the agricultural series ? " " Oh, well, we don't want it to look uniform with them." Bailey was a masculine Martha, overcareful of small matters, and Julian set down his tea cup and said, " Well, I must be off."

He took a bus to Oxford Circus, then the Bakerloo and the Southern Railway. It was always a tedious journey, and it seemed endless now. And that not from fear nor a pricking conscience. He was Julian Prebble and his father was unwell, and he was worried. Under the brim of his bowler hat a frown puckered his heavy forehead. His was a common trouble. Every day, he reckoned, some man or other travelled this same line, feeling as he did now.

Walking up the hill, he met a woman whom he knew, a frank, ugly, raw-boned mother of several boys, whom he admired in a sexless way because she could control her boys as easily as her husband could, and knew as much about Rugby football as Julian himself. She had been shopping, and she carried with ease two heavily-loaded string bags.

" Hullo, Mr. Prebble ! You're back very early ! " she called out heartily as she approached him.

Julian lifted his hat. His desire to talk again assailed him and he stopped.

" We're worried about my poor father, Mrs. Thompson. He's got a chill. Of course that's nothing in the ordinary way, but you don't know what it may lead to at his time of life."

" Oh, dear, I'm sorry. I suppose you're going up there now. Well, I mustn't keep you. I hope you'll find him better, anyway."

She showed her large, square teeth and went away down the hill, confident, plain and strong, That's a sensible woman, thought Julian. She lives exactly the same life as Phyl, but one doesn't have to be sorry for her. He wondered why, but he didn't pursue the thought, for now he had reached the oak fence of " Hill Crest," and his eyes sought the particular rhododendron bush under which the tin of weed-killer lay. He had chosen the exact spot by moonlight and under the stress of an intense excitement, and he couldn't recognise it now. A powerful feeling urged him to crane over the fence and see how the tin was lying ; but he controlled himself, and walked on. When he turned in at the gate of The Elms, he thought no more of it ; for there was a car standing at the door.

He hurried up the drive. He took very little interest in cars, but he recognised Doctor Hornburn's blue Morris Oxford, and nodded to the chauffeur as he went up the steps. The front door was standing open, and the hall seemed airier and less odorous than usual. Julian was glad of it, for he was sweating, despite the coldness of the day.

As he hung up his hat the doctor came downstairs.

" Ah, there you are, Prebble. We telephoned to your office, but they told us that you had started home. Come in here a moment, will you ? " He opened the door of the morning-room and Julian followed him. " I am very sorry to tell you that your father is dead."

" Dead ? " repeated Julian.

The doctor was a lanky man, somewhere between fifty and sixty, and very grey. He had a long, sheep's face and pale blue eyes, with red rims, which at all times watered as though he stood in the teeth of an easterly wind. A careful, foolish man, he was a fine Latin scholar, and in a community of ignoramuses his erudition was respected, and he was preferred alike to Doctor Trevor, who played bridge and went to the races, and to Doctor Juddson who stayed at home reading medical publications and keeping abreast of the times.

" I was afraid it would be a great shock to you," said Doctor Hornburn, stroking his sheep's chin and eyeing Julian. " It was a great surprise to me when I got Miss What's-her-name's message. She rang me up about four o'clock, but I was out, and I didn't get the message till I came in at four-thirty. To be quite frank, I felt that her alarm must be unfounded, but of course I came round at once. Your father's state was hopeless then. He passed away at ten minutes to five."

" I can't realise it," said Julian quite honestly.

He sat down on the arm of his father's worn armchair, and put his hand over his eyes, trying to concentrate.

" It's very sudden," said the doctor kindly. " When I called this morning, there was no indication of anything serious. Still, of course, your father's health was very bad, and I can't help feeling relieved that he was spared further suffering." He began to get bored. A cup of tea was what he needed. " I'll just get my bag and see to the certificate."

He went out into the hall and took his bag from the table. " I've got several more visits to pay this evening," he said as he came in again. " These east winds play havoc with old people." He took some forms from his bag, sat down at the table and began writing. " What was your father's full name, Prebble ? "

Mechanically, Julian answered his questions. Like a man watching a race that means a fortune to him, he felt his heart in his throat and his pulses frozen as he watched the doctor's pen glide over the paper. He was sitting too much at an angle to see what was written, and when the doctor laid his pen down and began to read, the suspense became unbearable. " What was the actual cause of death ? " he asked steadily.

Doctor Hornburn did not look up.

" Heart-failure," he said, and signed his name.

The affair was over. Something foul and dreadful, never admitted, never more than a formless shadow at the back of Julian's mind, spread its

dark wings and flew away. The world, life, happiness, lay before him beyond the transient April shower of an innocent and natural sorrow. There was no crime.

" You'll let me know when the funeral is to be," the doctor was saying. " I'd like to come if I can possibly manage it. Your father was one of my oldest patients here."

" I'll let you know," said Julian, seeing him out into the hall. " There are one or two relations I must get hold of, but nobody much."

" Well, good-bye, Prebble," said the doctor. " Even if one had realised the seriousness of your father's condition this morning, there was really nothing one could have done. We can go on patching, but there comes a moment when a break-up is inevitable. ' The days of a man's life are numbered.' "

" I quite realise that," said Julian.

And Doctor Hornburn drove away from The Elms thanking heaven that Prebble was a sensible fellow and not one of these gossiping women who would trot round the village telling everyone that only a few hours before his father's death Doctor Hornburn had diagnosed a bilious attack, and wondering what Doctor Trevor or Doctor Juddson would have done.

Julian turned back into the hall. Miss James came from the drawing-room. Her long nose was red, and she was sniffing into one of her best white handkerchiefs. She had not liked her employer.

He had always been rude to her, had insulted her before the servants, and joked with his bastard at her expense. Her crying was not for sorrow that the man had died ; it was the protest of humanity against death.

" Oh, Mr. Julian, I'm so sorry. Poor Mr. Prebble ! "

Julian hated her emotion.

" It's a great shock," he said stiffly. " But the doctor tells me that, although he didn't consider my father's condition serious, everything possible was done. We must have a talk about household matters." Having put Miss James in her place of house-keeper, he added, " I'll go upstairs."

Miss James nodded, and went into the morning-room, and huddled down beside the fire. She had got bitterly cold and lonely sitting in the drawing-room ; she would have liked to go down to the warm kitchen and drink a cup of tea and gossip with Cook and Maud and Edith about Mr. Prebble's last moments, but she couldn't dream of it, because she was the daughter of a professional man. So she had sat on a dust-sheet in a room like an ice-house, staring at a fire-screen and realising that her time at The Elms was over, that to-morrow she must go out to the registry office where she would be told that there was a much greater demand for general servants, and asked her age. The warmth of the morning-room cheered her. I have so little faith," she thought ; I must trust in God, and perhaps I shall get an old

lady who will let me do little things for her and won't be so hard on me.

Julian went into his father's room. The yellow blinds were drawn, but not the curtains ; and in the pale half-light he could see his father's small figure stretched out under the bed coverings, and the sharp, statuesque head on the smoothed pillow. Julian was a worldly man, and the frail and paltry remains of the dignity and strength of a life awed him ; unless it were really necessary, he didn't speak of the dead, hated to step on graves, was punctilious in lifting his hat to funeral processions. He couldn't go from this interview carelessly, as he had gone from interviews with the living man ; he must stop here for a moment in primitive, superstitious reverence for that piteous rubbish on the bed. He stood by the door, seeing nothing in the room but the face of the corpse, tracing in that not the way of a spirit's escape, but the last moments of George Wellesley Prebble. He tried to keep his thoughts charitable, cast back into his boyhood for a kindly memory, but nothing occurred to him—simply a bad old man had died. He hated to think that ; so strong was his will to deceive himself, so fortunate the turn of events, that he could have sentimentalised over the body which he had killed. He would have liked to think, what a terrible loss to me ! and dear old Dad ! and he couldn't ; and he felt himself defrauded of a creditable sorrow, not by his own deed, but by his father's unworthiness. I know what a father's love can be, he thought, and I

was cheated of it ; and in a rush of self-pity he turned from that niggardly bedside.

There were tears in his eyes as he left the room.

CHAPTER VI

SAFE

GEORGE WELLESLEY PREBBLE was buried in Putney Vale Cemetery on a morning like a steel engraving, so dry, so colourless, so cold. Julian went up to The Elms soon after breakfast, and was there to receive his cousin, Arthur Prebble, a chartered accountant from Beckenham ; his maternal uncle, Philip Lomax, a long-retired Army Officer ; his half-brother, who arrived a few moments after an enormous wreath of white lilies and pink carnations, despatched by a Bond Street florist, and bearing a card inscribed *To Dad, with fondest love from Eric* ; and Mr. Stuart Hitchcock, a director of Prebble, Game & Hitchcock Limited, who attended to represent the firm. The party, which assembled in the drawing-room, was an awkward one. Julian had hoped against hope that Eric would not come, but not only had he come, but he had come so immaculately dressed, so tall, so slim, so golden-haired, so genuinely sorrowful, that, although he remained in the hall, refusing to enter the drawing-room, he drew, like a magnet, the glances of the other men. Arthur Prebble, a man of devastating primness, stood by the door in

a thorough draught, unable to take his eyes off the love-child whom, all his life, he had heard mentioned with ribaldry in the dining-room and in the drawing-room with nods and becks. Major Lomax considered himself a man of the world, and he had resolved to prove it to this suburban community by his tolerant treatment of a man whose very existence testified to his sister's wrong ; but, whenever he headed for the hall, whether by accident or design, Julian checked him. Stuart Hitchcock, who until to-day had never heard of the scandal, quickly grasped the situation ; had already exchanged a wink with Major Lomax ; and was anxious to collect as much gossip as possible to retail in the firm. Julian was furious. He had not lived through the last few days without acquiring a sense of his own importance ; not only had he killed a man, but he had duped his fellows ; and although he had ignored his crime so successfully that it scarcely entered his thoughts now, subconsciously his always robust self-respect had swelled into the promise of a vast conceit. He had planned like a genius, slain like a god. To-day he had, not unnaturally, expected to hold the centre of the stage.

As for the man who did, he was entirely unaware of it. He had refused to go into the drawing-room, not on account of any social diffidence, but because he was unhappy and uncertain of his self-control. He had a soft heart and a sentimental mind. Standing out in the hall, waiting for his father's coffin to be carried downstairs, he was back again

in the flat at Maida Vale with the pink cushions and the muslin curtains and the smell of Californian Poppy. His mother hadn't, he supposed, been a virtuous woman or a clever one, but she had been the quintessence of motherhood, invariably kind, intimate and generous, with a soft shoulder and a chocolate cream when a child's world went awry. He had adored her, adding to that same almost mystical respect which the so-called lower classes feel for their mothers, the worship of youth for its first conception of beauty ; to a child's hungry æstheticism lovely was Queenie Waters, her pink rooms, her crowded dressing-table, her imitation jewellery, her scented dresses, her blue doll's eyes, her peroxide hair. As for his father, he ought, he supposed, to regard him as a seducer who had grossly wronged the mother he adored. But he couldn't find any wrong. George Prebble had taken Queenie Waters from the second line of the chorus in a second-class touring company, and had given her a cute little flat, and her darling baby, and money to spend, and long, long years of happiness and ease. And if mother hadn't gone first, thought Eric, she'd have been the saddest mourner here to-day. The old man got a bit crotchety of late years, but she'd have taken him out of this tomb of a house and looked after him, and tempted him with tasty little dishes, and kept him bright to the end.

With difficult dignity, the coffin was brought downstairs. Eric's religious beliefs were nebulous, but he had not formally discarded them ; from

similar motives he kept a black cat on the mantelpiece and a Bible in the bookshelf at his rooms. An idea, perhaps more sentimental than pious, that his father and mother were reunited in circumstances not unlike a pantomime transformation scene, sustained him as his father's body passed him and a host of homely memories assailed his tender mind. He gulped back a lump in his throat and walked out of the house behind the other men and beside Miss James.

The hearse was a motor one, very necessary to cover the distance to Putney Vale. One of the hired cars had been sent round to Canberry Gardens to pick up Phyl, and she and Julian with Major Lomax and Arthur Prebble travelled immediately behind the hearse. In the other car were Stuart Hitchcock, Eric and Miss James. Both parties spoke about the weather, the only subject which seemed to suit the occasion, though Stuart Hitchcoock questioned Miss James decorously about the neighbourhood, for he was a chatty man and had to speak to someone, and old Prebble's companion, frump though she was, was better than that matinée-idol fellow with his white spats and his waist and his golden hair.

There was a doleful, spoken service in the cemetery church, and then the short procession threaded through the stone-sharp avenues to George Prebble's resting place. It was very cold. The sky was steely grey ; and, like a knife, the edged wind cut down through the dun woods on the hill. George Prebble's grave was beside the

railings, strong iron railings to divide the dead in the cemetery from the pic-nic parties in the wood. It was a nice site, thought Julian, and the expensive white cross which he intended to erect would look well against the dark background of the railings and the trees.

Eric thought so too. His low spirits were beginning to rise a little. The sonorous fatalism of the funeral service had engendered in his receptive mind a more philosophic outlook; he thought, What must be, must be, and such is life! He began to look about him. Characteristically, he looked first at Phyl. He had never seen her, not in thirteen years of comings and goings at The Elms. Phyl had not had any black clothes in her wardrobe, and on the morning after her father-in-law's death she had been obliged to go out and buy everything new. For the first time in thirteen years, economy had not been her first consideration, and at the best of the local shops she had bought a smartly-cut coat and skirt, a helmet hat, real silk stockings and high-heeled patent-leather shoes. Her worn hands were gloved. To Eric, accustomed as he was to girlish vivacity, she looked well-bred and tired. But no S.A., he said to himself regretfully, and his glance travelled on to Julian.

Julian's handsome, fleshy face was red; wine and wind always brought the blood to his cheeks and nose; when he grew older, he would be a red-faced man. His tall hat was of a somewhat antiquated shape, his morning coat had the look of having lain for many years folded; with downcast

eyes and a solemn mouth, he looked elderly and odd. As much as he disliked anyone, Eric disliked his half-brother, thought him a starchy old stick, believed that he had bullied the old man. Across the open grave and the heaped earth that looked so fresh and brown on this grey morning, he stared with distaste at Julian ; and suddenly Julian lifted his head, and their eyes met. What the expression of Julian's eyes meant, Eric didn't know, but he felt a shiver run down his spine ; a woman would have said, " He gives me the creeps." But he didn't shift his gaze ; it was Julian's eyelids which dropped, and the incident was over, though Julian was still saying to himself : he doesn't guess anything ; he hasn't the wits ; it was his vacant doll's stare that put me off, and feeling relieved by the gradually slower beating of his heart. I'm not a nervous woman, he thought, moistening his lips and squaring his heavy shoulders. I'm not going to start getting jumpy now. Here's the Blessing, and in a second we shall all disperse ; and when the sexton comes back from his dinner he'll fill in the grave, and that'll be that. It's all over ; I'm safe, I'm safe, he thought, and he turned away from the grave with the others, and took his wife by the elbow and guided her across the grass to the avenue.

There was not to be a formal luncheon at The Elms. Miss James returned there and packed her box ; Stuart Hitchcock hurried back to business, giving a lift to Major Lomax who lived in Cheltenham, and was anxious to make the most of an

afternoon in town. Arthur Prebble lunched at " Lochaber " with Phyl and Julian and the boys.

" What about What's-his-name ? " Phyl asked Julian. " Don't you think we ought to offer him lunch ? " She and Eric had exchanged kindly glances as they had walked back through the cemetery ; and, though she had not admired his girlish looks, her lack of prejudice had allowed her to sum him up as sweet-tempered, generous, foolish and kind.

" Quite unnecessary," snapped Julian. " I don't suppose that I shall ever see him again."

Arthur Prebble's small eyes goggled. He had all a prim man's interest in vice. He thought that his cousin Julian had spoken very rightly, and, after a moment's consideration, he decided that Mrs. Julian must be ignorant of the situation, for surely no lady in her senses would offer lunch to her father-in-law's illegitimate son.

CHAPTER VII

"IT'S LATE"

GEORGE WELLESLEY PREBBLE'S will was proved. He had left everything unconditionally to Julian. In high good spirits, Julian sold The Elms and broached to Sir Curtis Fayre the idea of a partnership. Sir Curtis turned to his favourite poet. "'*The old order changeth, yielding place to new,*'" he quoted, for he had never been quite sure that Prebble was absolutely a gentleman; certainly the author of *Locksley Hall* would not so have considered him. However, anything was better than having strangers in, or taking up that sacrilegious idea of turning the firm into a limited company; and, after a short, sad conversation with Mr. Haydon, the business was put in hand.

Phyl engaged a competent maid, and went house-hunting. She didn't want a big house. With so much money going into the business, the boys to educate and a car to buy, Julian wouldn't be well-off, just comfortably off; and she looked for a house which could be run with two servants. It was April; and then May. Lilac bloomed in the suburbs, lattices opened on drifts of blossom, blackbirds called across small, wet lawns. Here

was a white house built for youth and gaiety; there, for homeliness, red brick and deep eaves; here, a green gate led to a garden; there, the turn of a stair gave you stars in a cedar tree. When, in the first year of her marriage, Phyl had looked for a house, she had looked for such things; now she looked to see if the larder faced north, if the linen cupboard were heated, if there were an adequate coal cellar and a good light over the stove; and she turned down two White Cottages, a Tudor Cottage and a Windy Corner, all æsthetically charming, on points like these. She did not enjoy her house-hunting; and when at last her careful choice fell in a square-fronted house without architectural affectations, she felt no pleasure. She had, in fact, sought and chosen as the hard school of life had taught her to seek and choose, not according to her fancy, which was unpractical, romantic and young. When people said, "House-hunting? How delightful!" she wondered vaguely why she found it so dull, but the reason never occurred to her; it was so long since she had indulged any desire of her own that she had ceased to want anything; she knew what Julian wanted, and what the boys wanted, and what the cook wanted, and her own loves were gone and forgotten, killed by the strength of stronger wills than hers, buried under the weight of use and time.

The boys, Julian and the cook were delighted with "Elsfield." It stood in one of the roads leading directly from the Common, and possessed a

tennis court and a garage with a workshop over it. The rooms were large and most conveniently planned. But unfortunately " Elsfield " would not be vacant till Michaelmas, and Julian already had an excellent offer for " Lochaber " from a young couple who were anxious to obtain possession on Midsummer-day. This trifling set-back to his plans exasperated Julian ; he had come to believe, like most poor men, that life is all plain sailing for the well-to-do. Ultimately, however, the young couple were persuaded to wait until the school term was over ; and Phyl went down to the South Coast to look for a furnished house for herself and the boys, and Julian at the week-ends. Because of Julian's week-ends, she could not go far afield, and it was late in the year to find a house unlet. After fruitless journeys to Dover, Folkestone and Littlehampton, she took a flimsy little house at Eastbourne, almost the last in a row built up towards Beachy Head. It did not look out on the sea, but on a spur of the Downs and the steep tangle of bushes and brambles through which the road to Beachy Head winds up in hairpin bends. I shall be able to turn the boys out there, was all Phyl thought as she saw the strong, quiet line of the chalk against the seawards sky. She travelled home across the ancient Sussex landscape feeling sensible and satisfied, for what could be more safe and suitable than a house in a row at Eastbourne during the banal months of the school holidays ?

Julian, too, felt satisfied that evening. He had

had an interesting day. Miss Bechler had called to argue with Walter Bailey about publicity, and afterwards she had looked in on Julian. " I've been grumbling at Mr. Bailey," she said with charming frankness. " I think your advertising is too terribly old-fashioned and restrained. One can hardly *see* your advertisements, much less anything about poor Me. These other publishers with their huge black type, or their spacing, or this stunt of having no capitals—they may be vulgar, but they do catch the eye."

" Mr. Haydon and Sir Curtis have always felt rather strongly about modern advertising," explained Julian. " But, of course, Mr. Haydon is retiring in the autumn, and I think you'll find that our announcements—Sir Curtis won't hear the word " advertisement "—will begin to be more visible then. I'm becoming a partner, you know." Miss Bechler was interested and pleased. " I suppose you'll sit upstairs in state, and I shan't be allowed to come and see you," she said with raised eyebrows and dark, mischievous eyes. There was a moment's pause, a short, electric pause which meant much more than either of them was prepared to say. " Of course you must come and see me," said Julian. " I don't say that I shall see all these people" —he waved his hand at the Sheraton bookcase, and particularly at the Two Shilling Crime Series. " But *you* . . . " Miss Bechler laughed warmly, deeply, as though she understood. " Well, I must be off ; I'm simply wasting your time." She rose ;

but Julian had money in his pockets now. He made a restraining motion with his hand. " Are you in a terrible hurry, or would you come out and have a little lunch with me ? "

" Oh, that's very kind of you," said Miss Bechler, looking grateful and surprised. " Are you sure . . . I mean, are you sure you *want* me ? "

" Of course I do. I shall be most honoured," said Julian, flattered and thrilled ; and in a masterly manner he ordered a taxi to be called.

He took her to the Savoy. In the taxi he could not help feeling nervous ; it was so long since he had taken a girl out, and this girl was very different to poor, domesticated Phyl. But, once inside the revolving doors, he found that his diffidence had vanished. At the end of the dull, penurious years, the strains of the Orpheans, the hum of voices, the clink of plates, the smell of food, and the presence of the smart and distinguished woman beside him, went to his head like wine. He ordered cocktails ; made a fuss about the table ; got what he wanted ; felt manly and important ; thought, this is my real self. Cynthia Bechler admired everything ; the room, the cocktails, the hors d'œuvres, the lobster mayonaise, the hock, the asparagus ; this was the very table at which she had always longed to sit. They talked books, ran down every writer until there was only Cynthia Bechler left to admire. " *Domino's* my favourite," said Julian—it was the only one of her books that he had read. " I love that Florentine period, people were real men and women then, with real loves and hates."

The last part of his remark was genuine ; he had reached the lusty, post-prandial stage when the Florentine period appeals to the Englishman. " Oh, do you feel that ? " said Cynthia Bechler on a sighing note. " So do I." She was looking her best. Her face was flushed with heat and hock, and above the rosy tint her eyes shone like dark stars. " I often wish I'd lived then," she said. " Of course life was terribly dangerous, but it's danger—at least to me—that makes life worth while. *You* don't look as if you liked safety and respectability," she added, frankly studying his face. " But I expect you do, really," she sighed. Almost the shadow of the palazzio fell on him ; almost the rapier was in his hand. " You mustn't brand me because I sit in an office, Miss Bechler. We can't all do as we like, nowadays. If I could . . . " " Well, what would you do ? " she challenged. He stubbed out his cigarette and smiled at her. " Never mind ! "

" Something terribly romantic," guessed Miss Bechler, pulling embroidered gloves over antique rings. " Will you ever tell me ? " " When I know you better," said Julian, very steadily as though he meant it. " Certainly I shall."

They hadn't arranged to meet again ; it would be so easy to find a point that needed discussion, a title page, a jacket, a binding, " blurb " for the autumn list ; and Julian had gone out into the Strand and found a coloured world that had been plain, a singing world that had been dumb. Full of excitement and hope, life, in such a world,

stretched before him; he didn't feel middle-aged now, but experienced, mature, able to handle life properly, to recognise its joys, to taste and appreciate them with the knowledgable passion of a connoisseur. And his mood lasted. He went home, saw Phyl come in tired, and pitied her. "You must try and get a rest while you're at Eastbourne," he told her. "Can't we get someone in to look after the boys?" "Oh, I don't think so," said Phyl. "No one could manage them." "Nonsense," said Julian. "Any *man* could manage them. They're too old for petticoat government, that's all. If you could get a tutor for the holidays . . . " "If I've got to bother with a tutor, I might as well bother with the boys," said Phyl, alarmed, already shy. "Nonsense," said Julian again. "A tutor wouldn't be a bother. We'd get quite a young man. Needy young men at the 'Varsities sometimes take such jobs." "Well, then I ought to have got a bigger house," said Phyl. "There *is* a fourth bedroom, but the sitting-room's so small. And we've only room for the one maid . . . "

"My good girl, a man who's glad to take a job in the holidays won't give himself airs. There are plenty of quite decent homes nowadays, with no maids at all. Look at us—until just lately. Why on earth should you knock yourself up rushing up hill and down dale after a couple of boys when we can quite well afford to pay someone to do it for you. And another thing. If John's going to Shothill in the autumn, it won't do him any harm to have a bit of coaching in Latin—say an hour

every morning. I think it's a jolly good idea." At last Phyl agreed with him. " Only, for goodness sake, get a boy from a small home, Julian, or I shall have to worry over his food, and the last state will be worse than the first."

Julian made enquiries, discreet enquiries, among the more reliable of his acquaintances, for he was a careful father, and just anyone would not do. People wrote to their young cousins at Oxford and Cambridge, but the University terms were nearly over and needy young men already had something arranged. A different type of young man was suggested, but Julian had his ideals. At last someone's friend thought it would be just the thing for one of the junior masters at his son's school ; " Mr. Hibbard asked me to come and see you," said Martin Howard, ushered by Ethel across " Lochaber's " parched lawn. Julian laid down the evening paper, got out of a deck chair, shook hands and looked at his man.

Martin was tall, and looked as though he were thinner than nature had intended him to be. He had dark red hair with a slight and becoming curl to it, brown eyes, a short nose, and a large, good-tempered mouth. He had missed being handsome, but he looked healthy and cheerful, though a life of few pleasures and incessant, paltry sacrifices had hardened a face which in adolescence had been ingenuous and merry. He was dressed in a dark blue flannel suit, well-pressed, but worn. With it he was wearing a blue shirt and an old Christ's Hospital tie. Julian saw a man not quite so tall as

himself, and not nearly so broad, evidently between twenty-five and thirty, older than he had desired, but very evidently possessing the unmistakable hall-mark of a public school. Julian was a poor judge of other classes of men; as a company commander he had been the prey of malingerers and flatterers; but he knew his kind. Ah, he thought, provided Phyl doesn't jib at an older man, this fellow will do. He said, "Sit down," and offered his cigarette case. Martin said might he light a pipe? That pleased Julian. He remembered that, apropos of something, someone had once told him that no pipe-smoker ever committed a crime. He lit his own.

"Well, it's for my boys," he said, sitting down. "Two of them. Eleven and nine. I don't think they're really troublesome, but my wife finds them rather a handful. We're moving into a larger house this autumn, so we've got rid of this, and in the meantime there's an interim, and I've taken a house down at Eastbourne for the whole of the summer holidays. I can't be down there myself except at week-ends, and the boys are active, of course, and perhaps a bit boisterous—I don't need to tell you what boys are. Also, I'm sending the eldest away to a prep. school next term, and, though he's quite bright, I think he's a bit behindhand. He's only been to a small day school. We didn't want to send him away too young. I'd like him to get on in Latin, and perhaps the other one could do a bit of mathematics. He always seems to be in trouble over his sums. But it's not much

of a job in the teaching way, and really I hesitate to offer it to you. When I spoke to Mr. Hibbard's friend, I was thinking of quite a young fellow from Oxford or Cambridge."

" Oh, well, that's all right," said Martin. " You see, I had something fixed up, but, at the last moment, it's fallen through. So when Mr. Hibbard mentioned this to me, I rather jumped at it. As long as you don't object to having someone older, I don't mind a bit what I do."

He wants the job desperately, thought Julian, and took ten shillings a week off what he had decided was the least that he could offer this older man.

" Oh, well," he said, " it's all right if you feel like that about it. All the better for me. They're going down to the South Coast on the twenty-fifth of July till, I think, the eighteenth of September, but, of course, you must consider your own dates. I mean, my wife can manage without you for a day or two both at the beginning and the end, if those dates aren't convenient. Well, then, the only other question is the question of salary."

Martin looked awkward.

" What were you thinking of ? " he said.

" I've not had much experience of this sort of thing," said Julian, smiling agreeably. " But I'm told . . . well, what about four guineas a week ? "

" I expect that would be all right," said Martin, wondering where his winter overcoat was coming from. " When I've done it before, as a rule I've had more money, but then there's been more

teaching. All right, Mr. Prebble, if that suits you."

"I should like you just to see my wife," said Julian. "I'll go and call her. She's in the house."

He went away across the lawn and in through the French windows of the drawing-room, and Martin could hear him calling, "Phyl! Phyl! Phyl!" What a terribly ordinary household, thought Martin, who liked generalizations and was all too apt to see individuals as types; and he thought of the hall with its oak chest and Oxford Almanacks, the Airedale terrier, the trim lawn, the cherished herbaceous border, the heavy, forty-ish father, and he expected to see emerge from the French windows the obvious wife of such a man and mistress of such a household, big, blond, toothy, capable, the jolly mother of bouncing boys. Instead, behind Julian came Phyl, and Martin's first thought was she looks young and squashed.

Julian said, "This is Mr. Howard, Phyl," and Phyl held out her hand in her uncertain way and said, "How do you do?" Although they were both shy people, they looked squarely at one another. Phyl was reminded of someone, and she couldn't remember who, and it worried her. Martin began to wonder if she were Julian's second wife, and it occurred to him that as an employer he would have preferred the toothy woman of his imagination to this chilly and uncertain girl.

Julian's voice boomed above them. "I've been telling Mr. Howard about it, and he seems willing to take us on." Martin laughed politely. He said,

,' Oh, I'm used to boys." Julian asked him some questions about his school, dull questions about the numbers and the games. They began to stroll towards the house. Phyl walked with them, listening, not speaking. " Well, now, when would you like me to turn up ? " asked Martin. " I'm free any time after one o'clock on the twenty-fifth. That's our prize-giving day." " Suppose you come down sometime on the twenty-sixth," suggested Julian. " What's the address, Phyl ? " " I'm not quite sure, myself," she said. " I'll write it down." She went into the drawing-room and Julian said, " I believe the house is almost out of the town, up towards Beachy Head. You'll take a train that suits you, and find your own way there." Phyl came out and handed Martin a slip of paper. He opened it and read the address quite heedlessly in his surprise at finding it written in so scholarly a hand.

" Well, *that's* settled," said Julian when Martin had gone away.

" I suppose he's all right," said Phyl.

" Of course he is. That man, Hibbard, must know all about him with three boys at the school. After all, he'll probably be much more reliable than an undergraduate. Didn't you like him ? "

" Well, I hardly spoke to him."

" No. You left me to tackle him. You might have told him something about the boys or what you expect him to do, instead of standing there as if you weren't even interested. Anyhow, you'll have to tackle him yourself on the twenty-sixth. It's a Friday, so I shan't be there . . . "

The thought of " tackling " the tutor, the feeling that there wouldn't be a taxi at Eastbourne Station, the fear that Ethel wouldn't like the kitchen, the horror that something had been left behind, together with many premonitions of evil and signs of ill-omen, combined to make a nightmare of Phyl's journey to the seaside. John sat in a corner seat, reading *The Modern Boy*, every now and then exclaiming, " Great Cats Alive ! " or " Lumme ! " in the vain hope that someone, by rashly enquiring the cause of his surprise, would furnish him with an opportunity to launch out into an explanation of a new safety device for the dynamos of airplanes or a model speed-boat with a performance of fifty miles an hour. Ethel sat opposite to him, looking gloomy, anticipating such hardships as a small kitchen, no housemaid's cupboard, and a low sink. Michael stood in the corridor with his chin pressed against the brass bar of the window, endangering his front teeth. " This is your bedroom, Mr. Howard," said Phyl in imagination, and remembered with dismay pink distempered walls and a mottled looking-glass. She saw Martin's brown eyes look about him with a haughty stare. " Supper's at seven, Mr. Howard, because I've only brought the one maid, and she likes to get it over." Would that be worse than suggesting to Ethel that supper shouldn't be till half-past ? Ethel had already discovered that she could bully Phyl, not that she thought of it in those words, for, as she knew goodness, she was a good girl ; but she had found in Phyl a soft-shelled

creature among crustacea, sensitive to the slightest opposition, vulnerable to the mildest shaft, at whom she need only scowl to get her own way. It would be better, Phyl decided, as the train drew in to Eastbourne, to offend the tutor than Ethel, for if the tutor left, she would only have to look after the boys as usual, whereas, if Ethel left, she would have to cook the tutor's dinner and call him in the morning, and the whole thing would become awkward and impossible.

" Eastbourne, Mummie," said John.

" What a small station, isn't it ? " said Ethel.

After all, there were many taxis waiting outside the station ; the drive through the streets and along the front, where the band was playing, corrected Ethel's first impression ; she admitted that the kitchen was handy, though she didn't see where the tea-cloths could be hung out. Phyl found a place for the tea-cloths ; the boys ran out on the spur of the Downs ; Pilgrim barked and frolicked ; not even the tin-opener had been left behind. By bedtime there was nothing left to worry about but the tutor, and the thought of him kept Phyl awake till midnight and oblivious of the summer moon at her window and the enfolding silence of the hillside on which the row of flimsy houses nestled. Next morning, she woke unhappily. " Bother it," grumbled Michael at breakfast. " That beastly old tutor's coming to-day." " Perhaps he'll be decent," said optimistic John. " Daddy says he played Rugger for his school." " I know what that means," said Michael. " He'll make us

practise passing on the beach, like Daddy did last year." "Well, that was quite decent," said John. "Everyone doesn't want to make mud pies like kids. Did it want to make a pretty sand castle? Wuzzums den?" Michael was taking the first bite from a very large and thickly spread slice of toast and marmalade, which he promptly threw across the table at John. John got up, and Michael got up, too, and dodged round the table with John after him. "John! Michael! Sit down at once!" shrieked Phyl above the noise they made.

The scene did not, as might have been expected, cause Phyl to look forward with any less foreboding to the arrival of her sons' mentor. The presence of a stranger at the table might oppress them for a day or two, but she knew how soon in their butterfly minds familiarity would breed contempt. Unobserved, she often took the line of least resistance, and she felt that she was now to reap the harvest of her negligence under this young man's contemptuous eye. In a despondent mood, she took up her shopping basket and found her way down a steep, chalky footpath to a cluster of shops which stood in what had once been the main street of a village, and now served the immediate neighbourhood. She bought some grape fruit for dinner, a lobster and some salad to support the cold mutton, and some raspberries and cream; and, having carried these back to Ethel and promised to make the salad dressing and prepare the grape fruit, she hurried down to the beach to bathe with the impatient boys. Martin had wired that he was

arriving for lunch ; and when Phyl had succeeded in getting John and Michael out of the water, and had dressed herself, she started up to the house, leaving them to follow her. As she turned the corner of the road, she almost collided with Martin, who had come up the little footpath from the bus stop, and was scarlet with the exertion of carrying a very heavy suitcase up the hill.

" Oh, hullo ! " said Phyl.

Martin set down his suitcase and took off his hat. His forehead was wet and he wanted to mop it, and he was slightly out of breath and didn't fancy making polite conversation as he lugged that infernal suitcase along the road. He felt annoyed with Phyl for bumping in to him at this undignified moment, but he was used to looking agreeable when he didn't feel it, and he smiled and said, " I hope I'm not fearfully late," not because he thought he was, but for something to say.

Phyl said, " Oh, no. But I'm afraid *I* am. We've been bathing, and we meant to be back in time for you, but the boys take such ages to dress that I left them to finish, and came along."

Martin picked up his suitcase. " I'm afraid it's some way," said Phyl. " It's one of those absurd little houses, but at the other end of the row." She spoke apologetically, but the sight of the tiny houses cheered Martin. Last summer he had tutored a rich man's son, and had suffered agonies of shame at revealing the poverty of his wardrobe to a supercilious footman ; he knew that there is nothing to be ashamed of in being poor, but it

was quite in vain that he strove to fortify himself with that noble thought. Thank God, I shall be allowed to unpack for myself, he thought, remembering the darn on the shoulder of his pyjamas and his refooted socks; and he said, "I think they're rather sweet little houses," and "This seems to be a great place for valerian." Phyl said, "It does, doesn't it?" and Martin hoped that the boys he had got to teach were brighter than their mother. "Down here," Phyl directed, and led the way down a tiny path through the valerian to the iron gate of the front garden. On the steep bank between the road and the asphalt path on which the gates of all the front gardens opened, a communal rock-garden had been constructed and planted chiefly with valerian, and only the upper windows of the houses were on level with the road. In this summertime the houses seemed buried in the red flower.

Phyl showed Martin his room. It was at the back of the house and looked out over the town, but the curve of the coast gave him the sea and the pier running out into it, far-off and small like a bird's-eye view. Martin stared out of the window. "I'm lucky," he said, "I've got the sea." Phyl noticed that the pink distemper clashed horribly with his red hair.

The boys were late for lunch. "It's not our fault," John began loudly in the hall. "We couldn't get our shoes on because our feet were wet, and you never undid our shoe laces like I asked you to yesterday, so don't blame me." "Well, come in

and see Mr. Howard," Phyl said tactfully, and to Martin in the dining-room came John Prebble, very blue-eyed and British with his bright, pugnacious face and sea-soaked hair. There are thousands of boys like John in this England, and Martin knew exactly how to treat him. Again he felt cheered. But then came Michael, glowering at tyranny. He's got twice as much character as the other one, and will be twice as tiresome, thought Martin, smiling indiscriminately on the pair. During lunch he proposed that he should take them up Beachy Head in the afternoon, and Phyl agreed, and for the rest of the meal was tortured with the fear that one or other of them would fall over the cliff's edge. She longed to say, " You'll keep them away from the edge, Mr. Howard, won't you ? " but, after years of Julian's contempt for such foolishness, she did not dare. Martin, however, said it for her, as they stood in the front garden waiting to find his hat. " I'll keep them away from the edge, Mrs. Prebble, and bring them back in time for tea." He was looking at her as he spoke, and he surprised on her face an expression of quite disproportionate relief and gratitude, which he was not enough of a psychologist to explain. It made him feel that he would like to do something for her, and he went indoors and found Michael's hat.

That evening John, in his bath, said, " He's jolly decent, Mums," and that was John's highest form of praise. Michael said, " He's got the loveliest stories about the battles round here. I think he's

a very interesting man." In a black chiffon frock and her new red shawl, Phyl went reluctantly down to dine with the paragon. Julian had often told her that she didn't know how to talk to men, so she modelled her conversation on Mrs. Thompson's—she knew that young men thought Mrs. Thompson jolly—and talked about golf and motor-cars. When she had first come into the room in her red shawl, Martin had suddenly made the discovery that she was pretty, though not in his style,—it was always a blonde in shell-pink taffeta who made him regret that he was too poor to think of girls—and he had felt the inevitable, faint quickening of interest in her. But sitting opposite to her now, polite and bored, he began to wonder how on earth he was going to get through two months of conversation like this, and heartily to wish himself back in his unhappy, intellectual home. " I've brought some work to do in the evenings," he told her the moment that they had finished dinner. " Shall I do it in my bedroom or in the dining-room when it's cleared ? "

Phyl, relieved, said, " There isn't a decent table in your bedroom. If it's writing work, I should do it in the dining-room." Martin went upstairs and collected his work, and took it into the dining-room, and sat there for a couple of hours among the imitation Jacobean furniture, constructing an index to a geological text book written by his headmaster. He was not disturbed until ten o'clock, when the door was suddenly and violently thrown open and Phyl rushed in. " Oh ! do come and help

me! Pilgrim's fighting in the road!" Martin leaped to his feet, dropping a blot of ink on an index slip neatly inscribed, "Glacial Epoch, 17; Period, 34, 50, 91," and followed her out of the house and up the asphalt path. The night was dark, but on the white road, even under the shadow of the down, two big dogs, locked in a ferocious combat, were plain to see. "It's an Alsatian," gasped Phyl. Martin outdistanced her, came up to the fight, got a grip on the collar of the larger dog, and began to twist it. A lady appeared at his elbow and asked if he would like a little pepper; and he heard another voice say that pepper would hurt the doggies' eyes, and that a bucket of cold water was best. Then Phyl arrived and seized Pilgrim's collar. Without shifting their grip, the dogs spun round. Martin held the Alsatian's collar in one hand and got hold of its lower jaw with the other. "You're breaking my dog's jaw, you fool," cried a furious voice behind him, but at the same moment Phyl pulled Pilgrim clear.

Martin looked round for the speaker, and an elderly, soricine man stepped forward and took the still snarling Alsatian. "Why don't you keep your dog under control, madam?" he said, glaring above the glaring hound. "I understand that your dog was the aggressor, sir," said Martin, taking out his handkerchief to staunch a wound on the back of his hand, of which he had only now become aware. Said the other, "If anything had happened to him, I should have sued you for damages, and that would have been a three-figure

affair. Kindly keep your dog on a lead in future." "We shall do nothing of the sort. Our dog does not fight unless he is attacked," said Martin with dignity. "Come along, Pilgrim, old boy." On either side of the unrepentant Airedale, Phyl and Martin walked away.

"Horrid old man," said Martin when they were out of earshot. "I hadn't an idea which dog started it, but neither had he. Are you all right, Mrs. Prebble?"

"My knees are knocking," confessed Phyl. "And Pilgrim clawed my stockings into shreds. But he knew me. You had the worst of it with that other brute. And the old man too. You were splendid. How's your poor hand?"

"Oh, that's nothing," muttered Martin. "I'll put it under the cold tap when I get indoors."

By the light of the hall lamp, however, she saw that his handkerchief was soaked with blood. "Undo it," she ordered. He unwound the handkerchief and stretched out a brown and not unshapely hand under a frayed white cuff. A small, deep puncture over the third dorsal interosseous muscle was bleeding sullenly. "Run and put it under the tap in the scullery," said Phyl; "I'll get some lint." She hurried upstairs. Martin went leisurely into the kitchen and switched on the light. In the scullery beyond, a tap was dripping. With a care born of long necessity, he took off his dinner jacket and rolled back his cuff, which he was pleased to see had escaped blood stain. Then he went through into the scullery and turned on

the cold tap. By the time that Phyl came down, his wound had stopped bleeding, and he was sitting on the kitchen table, humming a tune.

Phyl had brought boracic lint and bandages. She stood by the table and bound up his hand. Ethel had put the early morning tea things ready on the table, cheap blue-ringed crockery on the scrubbed deal board. Martin sat among them; and a deal dresser, filled with plates and dishes of the same pattern as the tea things, made a background for his attentive head. The kitchen smelled faintly and not unpleasantly of yellow soap, a new dish-cloth, shoe-polish and cheese. It was very quiet. The only sound in the house was the dripping of the tap in the scullery beyond.

"I don't know why I brought you in here," said Phyl suddenly. "I hope you don't mind."

"Why on earth should I?" said Martin. "I love kitchens. '*The large and patient furniture has stood . . .*'"

The excitement and comradeship of the dog fight, with this homely scene to follow it, had made him feel natural and friendly. He had begun to say what was in his mind, but then he had remembered that this was a woman who talked golf and cars, and he pulled himself up, blushing like a new boy who had done the wrong thing before the form.

Phyl tied the end of his bandage in a neat reef-knot. Then she continued for him:

"'*In sympathetic silence all the day*
With that old kindness of domestic wood.'"

"Good lord," said Martin. "Do you know that?"

Phyl smiled faintly.

"Why shouldn't I?"

"I don't know," he said awkwardly. "I didn't think . . . I mean, so few people are interested in poetry nowadays."

She picked up her scissors and the bandages and lint that she hadn't used. "I'm not interested in it nowadays. But I used to be. I don't know anything about post-war poetry." She looked at Martin sitting among the tea things and said:

"'*These have I loved*:
White plates and cups, clean-gleaming,
Ringed with blue lines . . .'"
"'*And feathery, faery dust,*
Wet roofs beneath the lamplight, the strong crust
Of friendly bread,'"

said Martin. "Lovely! But the post-war people have their merits. I wonder why you despise them?"

"I don't." Phyl snipped vaguely at the frayed end of a bandage. "It's simply that I don't think about poetry now. Life's been very busy, and I suppose what really matters most in the end is dinner. And then we've been fearfully poor, and one couldn't buy books."

"I know. That's what I suffer from. You read about people starving themselves to buy books, and it sounds very highbrow and lovely, but most

of us are mixed up with someone else, and it's another matter to starve other people. Still, there are the free libraries, and then you can sometimes borrow."

"Not often. People never buy the books one wants to read. They buy *The Divan of Death* or *Inspector Bloggin's Last Case.* And, if you go without a thing long enough, you cease to want it. We aren't so fearfully poor now, and I might have gone out and spent a fiver on books before I came down here. But I didn't want to. I can't think what made me come out with that Rupert Brooke quotation. Normally, I should have looked at those cups and thought, well, they're Woolworth's, and thank goodness it won't matter if Ethel breaks the lot."

"I'm glad you didn't. We should never have found out that we like the same things, and we should have gone on trying to talk about carburettors for the rest of our time here."

She laughed. "And I've spent years learning to talk about carburettors."

"So've I. And, if not carburettors, then games. I play them myself, so I take a certain reasonable interest in them, but, good lord! you should hear some of my colleagues. Sometimes, when I feel I want to be loved, I read it up, and then I go into the common-room and say, "I see Bunface did well on Saturday." And then they say, 'D'you mean C. W. Bunface or H. M. V.?' And then I'm done."

"Why aren't we strong-minded?" asked Phyl.

"Why don't we make them talk our stuff instead of having to learn theirs?"

"I can't imagine. But how many of your acquaintances can you quote a line of poetry to without blushing? Yet they don't blush when they tell us what happened on the seventh tee."

"That's because they're steam-rollers. They can't hear anything but their own noise. It's no use trying to attract their attention. They just roll on and over you." She thought of Julian; and was so shocked at her disloyalty that she turned to the door, saying abruptly, "And so to bed."

Martin got off the table, took his coat over his arm and followed her from the kitchen. "I must clear my mess out of the dining-room. Shall I lock up for you?" Phyl said, "I think Ethel's done everything but the front door." She bolted it, and Martin came out from the dining-room with his proofs and index slips. "That looks very erudite," said Phyl. "Oh, it is," he said. "*The Surface of Our Earth*, by the Reverend Lennard Hopkinson, LL.D. But I'm only the humble compiler of the index thereof. The Reverend Hopkinson bribed me to do it while he disports himself at Arolla."

Phyl came to a standstill at her bedroom door. "Good-night, Mr. Howard." Before she had time to think: but I've only met him once before to-day, she was conscious of the absurdity of thus formally addressing a man she knew so well.

" Good-night," said Martin, opening his own door. " Oh, I say, Mrs. Prebble, I'm sure you read in bed. If you don't mind waiting a minute, I've got some modern poetry here." He went into his room and reappeared with two slender volumes, and Phyl took them, and the feel of them in her hand carried her back to muggy Oxford afternoons and Mr. Blackwell's bookshop and the rich and philosophic temper of those gentle, generous years. She said, " Oh, thank you," and took the books into her room and opened one of them at random and propped it up on her dressing-table in the old way.

" *And love will come when life has said,*
' It's late :
he'll not be here to-night . . . ' "

was what she read, as she sat down at the mottled mirror and pulled off her shoes.

CHAPTER VIII

"YOUR JULIAN"

PHYL went to the station to meet Julian.

"Well, how are you getting on?" he said.

"Oh, very well," said Phyl. "The house is tiny, but it's all right, and Ethel seems pleased. The boys spend the mornings bathing, and they can get up to the Downs in the afternoons. Yesterday, Mr. Howard took them up Beachy Head. And when I let Pilgrim out last thing, he had an awful fight with an Alsatian, and Mr. Howard had to help me separate them, so he had a strenuous day."

"I should think so. We didn't engage him as a kennel man. How does he get on with the boys?"

"Splendidly. John did an hour's Latin this morning, and said that he'd enjoyed it! Michael did some arithmetic. I don't think he enjoyed that much. Still, he didn't make a row."

"He'd better not, or he'll find that I've got something to say to him." Julian leaned back in the taxi and frowned.

"Oh, Mr. Howard can manage him all right," Phyl said hastily.

"And how do you get on with him—Howard, I mean?"

"Oh, we made friends last night over the dog fight," she replied with unusual confidence.

Julian felt relieved. Phyl did not get on with men. It wasn't only that she hadn't sex appeal; Mrs. Thompson was as ugly as sin and as appealing as a doorpost, but she took the trouble to find out what you were interested in, and to make you talk about it, instead of trying to show off herself: and, though she didn't thrill anyone, probably not even Thompson, all men thought her a ripping sort. Phyl simply didn't try to please; and, whether it was because she despised people or because she trusted to charms she didn't possess, he had never made up his mind; he couldn't believe that, at her age, she was, as she affirmed, shy. "You used to be able to talk to people at Oxford," he had once said crossly. "What's the use of telling me that you're frightened of Thompson when you weren't frightened of Professors of Greek?" Phyl hadn't been able to explain, and Julian didn't bother about it now; only he had thought that it would be pretty awful for the tutor to have to dine in constrained silence every evening for a couple of months. "Oh, well, I'm glad of that," he said. "If you like him, it makes everything so much nicer all round."

That week-end was a delightful one. Julian had come down in high good humour, determined to enjoy himself and to make others happy too. He was by nature a generous man, and for years

he had been unable to give his kindly impulses rein. He bathed with his boys, treated them and other wistful urchins to rides in speed boats, gave them each five shillings to spend on the pier, arranged riding lessons for them, took Phyl to the Cinema, sent Ethel for a char-à-banc ride, hired a car to drive to Alfriston on Sunday, took Phyl and Martin to dine in the evening at the Grand. He enjoyed himself all the more because he had a man to talk to ; Martin was just as polite and deferent as an undergraduate would have been, but he hadn't an undergraduate's inevitable faults ; he hadn't flaming youth, wasn't post-war, didn't use slang that Julian had never heard of, nor hum tunes from shows that Julian had never seen, didn't know too much about motor engines, wasn't a speed merchant, nor a flying enthusiast, hadn't, in fact, any of those ways which make youth so intolerable to middle-age. Julian went back to London counting his blessings, his adequate income, his happy family, his standing in his profession, the Morris Six which was to be delivered to him on Wednesday, his date with Miss Bechler for lunch on Tuesday at her club, all of which he had obtained by what he never thought of now except as a kindly and courageous action, the liberation of a dear father's spirit from a body doomed to suffering. This was, he felt, his own reward for the risks he had taken, this sense of having fulfilled his responsibilities towards those smiling faces at Eastbourne, and of being free now to indulge himself. Phyl was content with what

he had done for her, didn't ask for any more; and if he bestowed a little of what she no longer seemed to lay claim to—a touch, a word, a kiss; he couldn't imagine himself going further—on another woman, where was the wrong? He dressed very carefully on Tuesday; wore a light grey cashmere suit, which was slickly cut and made him look slim, and a pair of new chamois-leather gloves which looked gay and youthful, and he filled his cigarette case with Turkish Abdullahs, forgetting a day when he had been glad to glance sideways into shop windows at a silhouette as British as Mr. Baldwin's. Cynthia Bechler gave him an excellent lunch at her pretentious club. There was no music to stir the senses, nor could Julian display himself as a masterly man, but to a man of his generation there was piquancy in the situation; with a patronizing and tender amusement he saw her play host. She did not resent it; she liked a man to be a man, a sex-conscious and protective male; and she found his superior attitude far more flattering than the equality and fraternity of the young men in her own profession whom she so assiduously and disappointingly entertained. "When am I going to see you again?" asked Julian, standing in the sunshine in St. James's Street, looking as young as Thresher and Glennie and a heart afire could make him. "Well . . ." began Cynthia. "Could we do a show one evening?" he suggested. "I'm all alone in town. And a little dinner first, somewhere handy for the theatre, if that wouldn't

bore you too terribly?" "Bore me? Why, I should just love it. But what about you? We must choose something very serious and highbrow for such an eminent gentleman." "Eminent?" said Julian. "And what about the author of *Domino*?" She shrugged her shoulders. "'Making patchouli of an honest bit of history,' a critic called it." "Don't you bother about critics. The public is what you're writing for, and it brought *Domino* unto the thirtieth and fortieth impression. Seriously, I'd thought of a musical show, Cochrane's or Noel Coward's or that thing with Stanley Lupino at the Gaiety." She hadn't seen any of them. "I'll see what seats I can get," he promised, and fixed a day, and said good-bye, lifting his hat and waving his chamois-leather gloves and walking up into Piccadilly with joy and hope.

He spent another week-end at Eastbourne before the date they had chosen; and, to the delight of his wife and family, he drove himself down in his new car. He told Phyl and Martin how he had lunched with the author of *Domino*; and Martin said that *Domino* was tripe, wasn't it? Phyl said yes, terrible, but Julian said, "No. Miss Bechler sets out to write cloak-and-sword stuff, and what she writes is first-class of its kind." He didn't mention that he was to take her out to dinner and to *Bittersweet* on the following Wednesday, but even to himself he couldn't have explained his reticence. To give her her due, Phyl wasn't jealous; according to her nineteen-fourteen philosophies, once so new, now, when sex is everything

from a joke to a religion, so old-fashioned, a man and a woman could be friends. She had, moreover, preserved beyond youth a certain, rather tiresome sort of innocence. Familiar though she was with the Mediæval Stage, when she saw Miss Ritchie from " Langdale " at the Cinema with that fellow from " Clovelly," it didn't occur to her that anything was—as Mrs. Thompson expressed it—" up," and much of her unpopularity at tea-parties was due to the fact that in a society where anything can be discussed as long as it is not mentioned she was never able to grasp the precise significance of such euphemisms as " You know what " ; " Hmm," with a pursed mouth and slow nodding ; " Just so," with a giggle ; and " *That* sort of thing."

" I'm sorry for you going back in this lovely weather," Phyl said, as she saw him off. " Still, now you've got the car, you'll be able to drive out into the country on hot evenings." Julian hated being organised and always resolutely refused to adopt any plan which she suggested ; but now he said, " That's rather a good idea." He had once or twice regretted that he had invited Cynthia Bechler to the theatre, a crowded restaurant and the stalls didn't offer many tender opportunities, but a drive home through Surrey's moonlit pine forests would have been just the thing. However, the tickets were bought now, and during the evening he would no doubt be able to suggest a drive. He kissed Phyl good-bye, smiled on her approvingly from the driving-seat, and started up the car.

Slightly lacking in imagination, but essentially cautious, with a practical eye and solid, well-balanced nerves, Julian was already a good driver, and he felt perfectly competent to call at Chelsea Court for Miss Bechler, and transport her to the Carlton in his own car. She was amazed at his ease in learning, believed him to be a born driver, couldn't drive herself, but was interested to hear all his difficulties, was nervous, but not to-night, not with him. Then there was a table in a window, summer evening, and the voice of the living city beyond it, flowers, lights, music ; and romance, not pink-and-white and tasteless to a middle-aged palate, but delicately spiced as, to some natures, only stolen pleasures are. Cynthia Bechler was dressed in gold tissue, one of the new frocks, very long but plain, hanging in heavy folds, its only ornament the dark and passionate crimson of a velvet rose. She wore no necklace, but a pair of long, gold earrings encrusted with garnets and a large garnet ring. She had a cloak with her, crimson-lined and richly collared. She wrapped it round her tall body with a stately gesture, and, as she and Julian left the restaurant they made a fine, substantial pair. They walked to the theatre. Passers-by stared at them ; some probably recognised the author of *Domino*. Though he was talking, Julian was supremely conscious of their glances ; walking with this tall, magnificent woman was a very different matter to walking with small, insignificant Phyl.

They were a little late for the theatre. Cynthia Bechler was always a little late for everything, again in contrast to Phyl, who invariably arrived too early and got cold and untidy as she waited meekly in lobbies, on platforms, outside Tube Stations, or at the doors of shops. And if Phyl had, by any remote chance, arrived late for *Bitter-sweet*, overcome by shame and remorse, she would have bent herself double and crept in, and every-one in the rows behind would have said that it was intolerable and written to the newspapers; whereas Cynthia Bechler sailed in, and every one was relieved and delighted to find that the smart set hadn't quite left London. Julian thought, what poise! what distinction! and, as he helped her to slip her cloak from her large white shoulders, he thought, what a figure! and thrilled when his hand touched the satin smoothness of her arm. He whispered, "All right?" and she turned her sleek head and looked at him with a laugh in her shining brown eyes and her finger on her pursed lips. A young man sitting next to Julian was irresistibly reminded of Baby Jumbo in Mrs. Hippo's School, but he was a very young man with a taste like Martin Howard's for fair girls in pink; and Julian, accustomed to Phyl's down-rightness, was charmed. He looked at the stage; but his eyes told him nothing. He was far more conscious of what he couldn't see, of the woman beside him whose proximity was beginning to stir in him thoughts and emotions unknown to him in thirteen years. I'm falling in love again, thought

Julian, and with rapture knew that he was young, one of those for whom the music is made and the lights lit, and far from the days that have no pleasure in them. But he wasn't a reckless man. He thought at once, what's this going to lead to? and drew his conventional line. He couldn't imagine himself desiring to cross it any more than he could imagine himself stealing or knocking someone on the head; but, on the angels' side of it, glittered for this Edwardian a whole world of romance, laughter and kisses and stolen meetings and tables for two and music and moonlight and throbbing hearts and clinging hands and sad partings and no commandments broken—he embraced it all. With a quick heart, for he wasn't of an age to stand a snub, he leaned towards her and his shoulder touched hers. She didn't move away; rather, he felt a slight pressure, and when the curtain came down she turned to him with a smile, and no words but the greater intimacy. He longed, when the light went out again, to let his hand stray into the folds of her gold cloak to touch her bare arm, but his lifetime's horror of the interlaced couples of suburban cinemas restrained him. And if I take her out to supper it'll be the same, thought the Edwardian, lost without his screen of palms. But Cynthia Bechler, a reactionist in some ways, in others was royally of her own time. "I don't feel like supper, somehow," she replied to his invitation. "It's so hot and stuffy in those places at this time of year. Come back and get a drink at my flat, Mr. Prebble.

There are sure to be some sandwiches for me, anyhow." Julian hesitated. He had his generation's curious idea that the lateness of the hour in itself constituted an indiscretion: he would not have hesitated to enter Miss Bechler's flat at mid-day. Then the magic word "Chelsea" flashed into his mind, and he felt his scruples to be suburban and absurd. "Well, if you're sure you'd rather . . ." "My window looks on the river," she told him. "At night it's prettier than any cabaret show." Julian wasn't a man to go into raptures over the Thames and the moon and the London County Council's electric lighting, and, curiously enough, his first thought when Cynthia Bechler led him to the window was that Phyl would have adored the view. "It's certainly very charming," he said without enthusiasm, and Cynthia Bechler understood that he didn't appreciate it and loved him for that manliness. 'I don't believe you care a bit about that sort of thing," she told him. "Never mind. After the literary young men I come across, it's like a breath of fresh air to come across a real man. Turn your back to my view, Philistine, and tell me if you like my room." Julian sat down on the window seat and looked round him. He saw a good-sized square room with a bookcase all round it to the height of the dado. Above the bookcase the wall was panelled and hung with portraits of French, Spanish and Italian nobles and kings. The carpet, the curtains and the cretonnes were of rich shades of wine-colour, and, before the unfortunate banality

of one of the Gas, Light and Coke Company's large-size gas stoves, was a broad divan covered with a leopard skin and spread with down cushions of crimson, wine and purple silk. On the top of the bookcase was displayed an interesting little collection of antique trifles ; daggers with jewelled hilts suggested the shadows of Florentine midnights ; snuff-boxes spoke of the Pantiles ; a chased Italian goblet gave you Venetian revelry ; there lay a claymore for the hopes of Scotland, here a cutlass for the Spanish main. " I do like it. It's very like you," said Julian, and his eye came to rest on the tall Italian writing bureau where Miss Bechler patched and gilded the sorry past. He noticed the pile of foolscap and the enormous red quill-pen. " I suppose that's where you write," he said, and glanced round the room again. " If atmosphere means anything to you, you're lucky to have a room like this ; but I suppose that while you're writing you're quite oblivious of ordinary things ? " Cynthia Bechler jumped up from the window seat. " Don't let's talk about me and my stupid room ! Let's talk about you ! To begin with, a whisky-and-soda ! Come along and help me get it from my spacious dining-room." She led the way into a tiny room, furnished entirely with a red lacquer table and a settee to match, and, from a refrigerator built into cupboard space, she brought out an antique decanter and syphons. She did not say, as Phyl did to visitors, " There you are ! " or " Help yourself " ; but she said, " I believe I know *just* how you like it," and made

a charming little to-do of antique glass and exquisite, jewelled hands, before the drink was quite good enough to be offered to him. Then she returned to the refrigerator, discovered a plate of sandwiches and some fruit. " A midnight feast ! " she cried merrily as they carried the spoils into the sitting-room. " Put anything anywhere ! On the floor, if you like ! This is Chelsea, you know." " I'm not sure that it isn't mediæval Italy," said Julian. " All these daggers and things make me feel that it's a scene from *Domino*." " And my poor, despised view is a view of the Grand Canal ! Italy ! I only wish it were ! But you wouldn't have been at home in mediæval Italy. I'm sure that you're terribly British and respectable." British and respectable ! Could that go unchallenged ? She might as well have added, middle-aged and middle-class. I'll show her, thought Julian. He sat down beside her on the divan, awkwardly arranging his long, unsupple limbs, very conscious that he was sitting on a divan in Chelsea with a well-known author at a raffish hour of the night. " I suppose I do give that impression," he said. " But you're a novelist. You should be able to see deeper." She lay back against the gorgeous hues of the cushions, her arms outstretched, a rich, voluptuous figure in her long, golden gown. He was watching her. The careless freedom of her pose set his pulses throbbing ; his long-starved senses flamed. But he grew pensive. " It's not the novelist who sees deepest," she told him sadly. " It's the woman. You know that Robert Browning says a man :

' Boasts two soul-sides, one to face the world with,
One to show a woman when he loves her.' "

Loves her! The blasphemy had only needed speaking. There was a short pause. Then, " That's true," said Julian, and leaned across the cushion and kissed her mouth.

" Cynthia."

She didn't move. He had expected, if not remonstrance (for her lips had been soft under his), then surely surprise at this abrupt revelation of both his feelings and hers. But she lay quite still, only at her name she turned her head and smiled at him, a slow, tender and triumphant smile. He was astounded, intrigued and thrilled. Love, as he had known it, had been the difficult wooing of a chilly and immature girl of nineteen, an affair of awkward sweetness, the gossamer of which had not withstood the gross touch of everyday. He didn't recognise, never had recognised, the clumsy fluttering of the earth-bound, unearthly thing; and now, in this glib stir of the senses, he hailed love at last, ripe, full-blooded, generous, the plain sailing that he didn't know sex is and love is not. He cried, " Let me show you my other side, because I love you! " and he saw his other soul, thank God, no fortyish paterfamilias redolent of roast beef and income-tax, no bowler-hatted denizen of " Lochaber " or " Elsfield," not Julian nor Mr. Prebble nor Daddy, but a darkly passionate and royally guilty lover—Paris, Launcelot, Lord Byron in one. " I love you! " he said, " forgive me! "

and bowed his head until his hot forehead touched her hand.

Then she spoke.

" It had to be ! " Like all conceited people, she liked to be noticed, and when she had renounced Christianity, she had missed, most of all, the flattering Christian belief that God was busy with her concerns. She had therefore embraced fatalism, and was consoled by a vision of an Attic figure at pains to control her destiny. " The first time we met, I guessed it. ' *This for me and I for this,*' " she quoted, and for a curious, cold, professional instant wondered who on earth had written it. " Yes, this is a great and wonderful thing that has come to us, Julian." And Julian remembered his paltry aspirations—a kiss, a word, a touch—and was hotly ashamed. " You're magnificent to take it like this," he cried. " You glorious woman ! " and, launched on the tide of a pure passion, nothing of the spirit here to halt or tremble, he took her in his arms and kissed her eyes and mouth and hair. " It isn't me that's magnificent," she told him breathlessly. " It's love. I always knew that it wouldn't come to me the safe, tame way." He would have spoken, but she put her hand over his mouth. " I'd rather have it so," she said. " Right or wrong, I glory in it. I'd rather have danger, suffering even, than the mild, domestic affection other women have. All down the ages it's the ill-starred loves that are sung." She held out her arms to him. " My lover ! "

They made no plans that night. The simple, crude and chemical quality of their passion left Julian free from either longing or regret. His mood was one of intense complacency ; he had answered the doubts, allayed the horrid fears, gratified the desires of the spring evening in Canberry Gardens, when he had realised that he couldn't stand another summer of the life he was living then. Forty he might be, but a man was as old as his arteries ; he wasn't a youth, he acknowledged, but he was in his prime, young enough to be physically attractive to women, yet mature enough to interest a clever woman as a young man couldn't ; in fact, just right. And morally just right too. Not a libertine, but not a man who hadn't lived either ; not dull, domestic, suburban, uxorious, respectable, middle-class, truly British—none of those laughed-at things. As he travelled by tube from his Kensington hotel to British Museum, he looked with scorn and pity at the mild and solid men who travelled with him, saw their Kensington homes, their faded wives, their duteous nights, felt himself Chelsea, free, Bohemian, someone the Sitwells couldn't ridicule, modern, not a back-number, thank God ! thank God ! Ah, he was happy ! He skimmed through his work, his favours now for the brilliant young men ; youth to youth ; dodderers next door ; " Sir Curtis will deal with Sir Perceval Strickland's letter, Mr. Hallett," and " Professor Gibbings would prefer to see Sir Curtis, I feel sure." On his way out to lunch he went to a florist, ordered a large bunch of dark red roses,

paid a guinea for them, felt Latin, charming, worldly, as an undergraduate does who buys a bouquet for an actress for the first time. He left his office soon after four o'clock, and took a taxi to Chelsea Court. She wouldn't go out to tea. "We get all the air from the river up here, and, besides, I can't leave my roses. We'll move the table into the window, and then we'll be as near the river as we should be at Hampton Court." He loved her capriciousness, no milk-and-water "Whatever you like, Julian"; it reminded him that she was accustomed to admiration; intensely he valued her. "Very well," he said, "but on condition that to-morrow you let me take you somewhere in the car. Some place where we can stay the week-end. You'll come? You're not afraid?" A scornful smile twisted her mouth. "Afraid? No." She turned away from him, her smart, sleek head in profile against the leaves and the bright river and South London's hazy blue. "But there are others . . ." She despised the evasion and met his eyes. "Your wife."

Julian made a gesture that dismissed poor Phyl; but Cynthia said, "Sooner or later we must come up against this. I am not a thief, Julian. Nor am I a whiner. Fate has sent me this darkling love. Well, we know that

'La douleur est un fruit; Dieu ne le fait pas croître
Sur la branche trop faible encor pour le porter.'"

She spoke French well, and enjoyed doing so. " And I won't take what's hers."

" You don't," said Julian, embarrassed, loathing the necessity to think or speak of Phyl. " She's got all she wants. You don't understand what marriage is. You wouldn't get like that. I mean one's young, and one falls in love and gets married, and then the days go by, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday, years and years of them, and it all wears off, all the gilt off the gingerbread, and one is still tied down. Well, there's a sort of friendship, perhaps, sometimes almost a brother-and-sister sort of feeling, but love's gone, gone. You wouldn't be like that. You'd hold a man. But you must try to understand it. It's nobly generous of you to think of her, but you're taking nothing that she's had for years."

" My dear," she said, " all I want is your love. I'm not the sort of woman who thinks she can be friends with a man. I don't play games nor drive cars, nor ride on the pillions of motor-bicycles, nor go for long walks across ploughed fields. I couldn't be ' a pal.' But just as your lover, then, I'll come."

Where should they go ?

The river was vulgar—little pink bungalows and sprawling embraces in punts. The seaside was ridiculous—spades and pails and bathing belles and shrimps. Hindhead was a welter of char-a-bancs and Austen Sevens. The New Forest was full of flies. Finally they decided on the Cotswolds, a

district unknown to either of them, a vague dreamland of sheep and stone cottages and cavaliers; and Julian wired to an hotel for rooms. He also wrote to Phyl. "*I've got an important dinner on Saturday evening,*" he wrote, not hating the deceit, thinking of this letter as just a tiresome little thing that had to be done, like wiring for rooms and filling up with petrol. "*Haydon did a lot of entertaining and it falls to me now. It scarcely seemed worth while coming down on Sunday, so I accepted an invitation to golf. I'm afraid the boys will be disappointed about the car, so hire one for Sunday or any other day if there's anywhere you'd like to go. I shall be down the next week-end, as far as I know at present. I hope so, anyhow.*"

And he signed himself as usual, "Your Julian."

CHAPTER IX

" IF LIFE WERE REALLY LIKE THAT . . . "

" OH DEAR ! " said Phyl without looking up from her letter. " Daddy's not coming this week-end."

" Oh lord ! " said John, disgusted. He wasn't thinking of his father, but of the wonder and the beauty and the power under the bonnet of the Morris Six. " What a beastly wash-out," he said unsteadily. " We shan't have the car."

" And we shan't go to Bodium to-morrow," whined Michael, as in the cloud of parental perfidy vanished drawbridge, moat and tower. " That's just what *would* happen." Tears stood in his eyes.

" I should think we could manage Bodium without the car," said Martin. " We could go as hearty trippers in a char-à-banc. Or by train and earnest walking. Where's the map ? " He wasn't sorry—or was he distinctly glad ?—to hear that Julian wasn't coming. At their first interview he had summed him up as commonplace and boring, but during the week-ends at Eastbourne he had taken an active dislike to him, thought him rude to Phyl, tactless to Michael, overbearing and

didactic to everyone else, in fact, " a steam-roller, hearing nothing but it's own noise, rolling on and over you." Well, it was a very ordinary type ; you came up against it constantly ; there was really no need to put yourself into a temper because your employer didn't open the door for his wife. Still, there must be something particularly irritating about the man, for the very mention of his name annoyed Martin, and yes, he was extraordinarily glad that he was to have the week-end alone with Mrs. Prebble and the boys.

" I'll get the map," offered Michael.

" Oh," said Phyl, " Daddy says that we can hire a car. There, you see, Michael, it's not such a bad world after all." Michael sniffed and brightened, but John grumbled, " What's the use of that ? The man won't let me look at the engine. Who wants to go about like an old lady in a rotten old hired car ? " Martin said, " Well, all cars are interesting. If this is the same one that we had to go to Alfriston, it's an Austin, and we'll get the man to let us look at the engine, and then you can compare it with the Morris, and see which you think is the better job of the two." John said, " That man's such a beastly, grumpy old thing. I asked him something the other day, and he wouldn't tell me." " Well, I'll ask him," said Martin, and John said, " Oh, will you ? Oh, thank you. He'll do it for you." Martin's difficult life had taught him a long patience and easily bent a sympathetic mind to the trivial art of domestic diplomacy.

" I'll call in at the garage when I go down to the shops," said Phyl. " Which would be the nicest, to take lunch or tea ? "

John and Michael began to shriek suggestions, but Martin said, " Shut up. What does your mother want ? " Phyl said, " I don't mind. What would anyone else like ? " It wasn't altogether easy to treat her *en reine.*

Martin said, " Shut up," again, for he saw the boys' mouths open. There was something about Mrs. Prebble—was it her squashedness, or her lovely eyes, or because she was small, or because she was so extraordinarily stupid in some ways ?—that made him feel protective, agog to fight her battles, even if that only meant letting her dog out in the evening and preventing her sons from shouting her down. He said, " We'd like to do exactly what you'd like," and John, who had learned very little Latin from his tutor, but a great deal else, piously echoed, " Yes."

In the end, they took a pic-nic lunch to Bodium. Phyl sat down under an oak tree and unpacked it, serenely confident that Martin was not allowing her children to climb on the masonry or lean over the tower. A few things had been forgotten—salt, of course, and the opener for Martin's beer—but Julian wasn't there, so it didn't matter, and Phyl sat under the oak and looked at the sun-drenched hillside and the quiet, strong castle standing in the shining water ; and she began to dream as she hadn't done for years, and to invest the place with the men and women and the joys and sorrows of

long ago. When Martin came over the grass with the boys trailing behind him, she said, " I've been trying to imagine what it was like in the Middle Ages, but the people won't come human." Martin reflected. " That's the fault of these wretched historical novelists—that woman your husband was speaking of—what's-her-name ? They cloak and sword their characters and set them leaping about like Douglas Fairbanks, when they were really only poor mutts making a muddle of things like ourselves. I can't stand the tripe that woman turns out. She's got no respect for herself or her public or the past."

" What about lunch ? " said John.

" Oh, there's no salt," said Phyl. " And, Mr. Howard, there's no opener for the beer."

Martin told the boys to go to the little shop at the gate of the grounds and buy a packet of salt and borrow an opener. If they couldn't buy the salt, they were to ask to be given some, and then they were to buy a packet of postcards or some chocolate. He spoke as though it were a sort of adventure, and they went off without grumbling. Martin sat down at Phyl's side.

" Anyhow," he said, " nothing terribly exciting seems ever to have happened here. I expect they were all quite dull and happy, and sometimes they came out of the castle and sat under the oak leaves like us."

" It feels a happy place," said Phyl. " Some places feel so desperately miserable. Holyrood does."

" I believe in being happy," said Martin. " Don't you ? "

Phyl thought. " I suppose I do. But I don't think I'm very good at it. I mean, I can have all the things that are supposed to make you happy, and still not be happy at all."

" But you're such a lunatic," he complained. " It's all very well to be unselfish, but you don't think of yourself when you should. Look at you yesterday when we were talking about coming here ! We were all dying to please you, and yet you wouldn't tell us what you wanted."

" Oh," said Phyl, " but I'm so happy here. That's what's so funny ; in that absurd little house in August at the seaside. And we haven't really done anything except awful things like char-à-banc rides and tea in the town."

" Perhaps you needed a holiday," suggested Martin. " Or it may be the air. I feel awfully happy here myself, but that's because you've been so nice to me."

" I haven't," said Phyl, maladroitly. " You've been nice to me. You lent me Humbert Wolfe and Seigfried Sassoon, and listened to my ravings. Besides, you sent me back to my first love. I'd forgotten poetry. A yellow primrose was a yellow primrose. It's different again now."

Martin was sitting with his hands clasped round his knees. His face lit up with pleasure.

" Is it ? "

Phyl smiled at him. " Yes. It's like the old Oxford days. I wish I'd known you then. We'd

have gone for wet walks on Boars' Hill, and we'd have run into each other in Blackwell's, and you'd have come home to tea. You'd have loved our house. It was teeny and there was no front hall. You had to go through the dining-room to go up the stairs. Fat white men never knew where to put their hats. When Father was at the War, we had an awful job to let it because there wasn't a hat-stand. In the end, we let it to some people called Toye."

" I suppose they were cheap Toys, and their hats didn't take off," said Martin. " What a terrible joke. I had to go straight out to France from school, or perhaps I might have got to Oxford. How you must hate these other houses ! "

" I hated ' Lochaber.' It was smug, and I fought against it, and it defeated me. But the house we're in now ; it's appalling, of course—that dreadful pink distemper in the bedrooms ; and one knows that the staircase arrived on a lorry all in one piece. It's much worse really than ' Lochaber.' But somehow . . . "

" ' *All beauty in a little room may be,*
Though the roof lean, and muddy be the floor.' "

suggested Martin.

" Yes. The fact is, you never know where it will turn up nor why. Nor when it's going. You do all the right things—plant rosemary in the garden, put a lamp in the window, stand the poets on the shelves, hang up the Oxford Almanacks—and it

goes ; then you take a furnished house in Eastbourne with the Stag-at-Eve over the mantelpiece and earwigs in the bath mat, and it's there. At least, that's what's happened to me. You're much more strong-minded. I expect you find it everywhere."

" I don't. In my own home there's not a spark of it. Last summer, in that lovely place, Inger Priory, there wasn't. Hullo ! there are the boys ! "

Most of their conversations ended that way ; when it wasn't the boys, it was *The Surface of our Earth* which intervened ; and, though they discussed all things under the sun, they were spared their conclusions. Phyl had understated her case. She woke with joy to golden mornings, not to the day for cottage pie or for the laundry to come back ; the beauty of earth, from the sea to the shadow of stones in the road, was again apparent to her ; sun and water, heat and shade, walking, swimming, laughing, Verse and night, made a sort of crystalline loveliness—Brookeian days. She had returned to her pre-war philosophies, she saw that, but why, she didn't know, so little she knew that she thought often and kindly of Julian, of how culpably weak she had been to let time and circumstance defeat her ; Herbert Trench's lines brought shame to her ; she hadn't been captain of her soul. Poor Julian, she thought, how damnably I let him down ! He married Phyl Aitken, who lived in Merton Street and for poetry, and had nice clothes, and went for walks, and saw the loveliness and the funniness

of everything, and he got Phyl Prebble who lived at " Lochaber " and for the next meal, and wore an overall and a ripple-cloth dressing-gown, and saw nothing that wasn't worrying or wrong. Oh, dear! thought Phyl, why didn't I stick to the old things, like Martin did ; even if I'd left the house thick with dust and let the boys' ears go dirty, it would have been better than making everybody miserable, and you're bound to make everybody miserable if you're disloyal to yourself. Why didn't I fight harder? and she remembered with anguish the receding hair on Julian's temples. His youth's over, she thought, and for all these precious years of it he's had no fun at all. She came, however, of a generation which had seen too much milk spilt ever to cry over spilt milk again. Now I've realised what I've done, I'll make up for it, she thought, and, besides walking over the Downs to Jevington and laughing with Martin and the boys until she cried, she went into Eastbourne and bought some crisp cotton frocks and had her hair permanently waved. " Daddy will have a fit," said Michael, intrigued by the result, and John said, " I wish you knew something about machines, and then you could have explained to us exactly how it was done." But Julian didn't come either that week-end or the next.

Phyl was sorry. She locked her new frocks in the wardrobe and slept in a hair net to preserve the first glory of her wave. She wrote a long, difficult letter to Julian, touching on old times. *' We walked across the Downs to Jevington. It was*

hot and quite different, but somehow it reminded me of our walks on Boars' Hill. Do you remember the time we saw the primroses and quoted Wordsworth, and the keeper came and turned us out of Bagley Wood—so like St. John's. Now the boys are so big and we're going to have maids and all, perhaps we shall be able to go for walks and see primroses and be turned out of woods again." That walk had taken place during Julian's courtship, and the memory was a sentimental one. But when Julian answered the letter, he made no allusion to it. For a second week-end, he said, he was unable to get out of London. Authors were a nuisance. Damn them. And again he was Phyl's Julian.

The second Sunday without Julian was a cloudless day. It was too hot to do anything but bathe alternately in the sun and in the sea. When it came to be lunch time, the boys rebelled at going indoors, so Phyl and Martin dressed and went back to the house, and got together a cold lunch which they carried down to the shore. The tide was going out, and, when they had finished lunch, Martin suggested a walk. No longer, on such occasions, did Phyl drearily propose to stay behind and tidy up. " Bung all the remains into the basket, John, and if it won't shut, jump on the lid," she directed, looking young and not at all squashed now, thought Martin, in a new blue gingham frock—well, Julian hadn't come and summer would soon be over—and a blue linen hat which was a brighter but not a prettier blue, thought Martin, than her eyes.

John jumped on the basket. They left it under a breakwater and started off along the shore. The boys, still in bathing costumes, walked in the water. Phyl and Martin had shoes and stockings on. They walked at the edge of the shingle where the sand had dried, and were continually obliged to choose between spoiling their shoes and climbing over the steep side of the groins. The boys skipped in and out of the water, calling them muffs.

Presently John found a cowrie, a rare prize on that beach, and Michael, his conchological rival, determined to find one too. On hands and knees along the beach he crawled, up against the world as usual. " Come on ! " and " Buck up ! " shouted Phyl and Martin, and good-natured John said, " Here, Mike, have mine." But Michael wouldn't. It wasn't the shell that mattered to him, but getting it, and he continued to crawl at some distance behind John, who splashed through the water calling out inaudible remarks about speed boats both to his brother and to Phyl and Martin ahead.

" What's John yelling about ? " said Martin.

They stopped, and heard the sum of John's philosophies—the three words, " miles per hour."

" Let's just look round the corner," said Martin as characteristically. " And then we'll go back and be intelligent."

So Phyl and Martin rounded the bastion of the cliff, and there they both stood still, silenced by the charm and beauty of the sight that met their eyes.

To the right of them swifter than a tower, the white cliff soared into azure blue. The high south sun shone full on it ; a dazzling white it was, a dazzling blue the sky. Martin had seen the Alps, had stood on the Col de Géant, but never had he received such an impression of light and height ; unearthly it seemed, some blinding revelation, until the eye fell on the lyric scene beneath. From the foot of the cliff, firm sand stretched to the crystalline ripples of the out-going tide ; and on the sand, classic shapes from some earlier, brighter world, a man and a girl danced to music of their own. Both were young, slender and sunburned ; their rhythmic limbs were no less delicate than strong ; and the wet bathing dresses which they wore scarcely broke the blessedly clear, pure line of the nude. High above them, round the summit of the cliff, the calm wings of seagulls beat the sparkling air, but no bird cried ; the only sound was the small waves' sudden and clear splash. The scene was one which must have held the grossest, so bright in the drab days of the toiler, so pure to the dim mind of the wastrel, so fresh to the weary, so young to the aged, so free to the slave ; and Phyl and Martin, standing side by side, saw life as it was created, as the Greeks tried to make it, and only one Englishman dreamed of it, human life washed clean of the murk of the centuries, back at the beginning with earth a green floor for happiness and sex stripped of muffling romance and besotted sentiment, the cold, brave, brilliant thing that it was

meant to be. Both of them were desperately disillusioned, had been miserably unhappy in the high days of youth, had worked to the breaking-point of brain and sinew, had seen the wretched harvest of their labour, and morning, and no joy come; yet both had preserved one unattainable star in their darkness, the knowledge that this draggled, faded, treacherous, bankrupt life they led wasn't life as it should be. Like a child confronted with some vision of an obstinately-believed-in Fairyland, Martin put his hand out, and took Phyl's. They stood there, watching Eden, hand in hand.

But not for long. John's voice, stating speed records, reached them; and, to stay the sacrilege, they turned away. "If life were really like that Phyl . . ." said Martin, and it wasn't, and their hands unclasped. "Are we going back now?" said John. "Yes," said Phyl. "We're going back." John walked beside them. "I've been telling Michael a few things about aeroplanes," he chattered. "But of course he thinks he knows best. He thinks he knows better than Sir Alan Cobham. Sir Alan Cobham . . ." "Oh, damn Sir Alan Cobham," said Martin, with such bitterness in his voice that John looked up at him, judged him "ratty" and was silent. "Michael's silly. He knows quite well that he doesn't know anything about aeroplanes," said Phyl, sorry for John. Martin felt ashamed of his outburst. He said, "Would you like another bathe when we get back to the breakwater? I'd like to see you do

a really decent dive." He was again the tutor, Phyl the mother. Circumstance had them neatly back in their pigeon-holes.

They bathed. Martin watched John dive and said, "Now, then, a better one this time!" and "Gosh! What a belly-flopper!" and "Try again," and Phyl swam to seaward of Michael and said, "Slower, darling, slower," and "Don't get flustered," and "Well done!" The sun went round into the west. They came out of the water. Martin found the boys' towels and tucked their shirts in and undid the knots in their shoelaces, and Phyl called to them to remember their ears. When they were dressed, they had tea. Martin and John went to the tea shop and carried back the tray, and Phyl and Michael buttered buns. They talked about swimming, and after tea they played the unwinding game. Then they went home. It was a hot walk up the cliff and along the road, and when they got into the house the boys were tired and cross; only promises that Martin would go upstairs and say good-night to them coaxed them to bed. Martin went up and sat on each bed in turn, and told a story about the War, which was not nearly finished when Ethel rang the supper gong. He was five minutes late, and just as he came down Phyl discovered that neither of the boys had cleaned his teeth. Michael said he wasn't going to, either, and Martin had to go upstairs again, assume a terrible manner, order him out of bed and deliver a homily on false pretences. When he came down,

Ethel was muttering in the kitchen, and Phyl had eaten her grape fruit and was carving the ham.

They talked about the boys. Ethel walked in and out with dishes, trying to hurry them ; Sunday evening was Sunday evening, and people forgot that, and you had to let them know. Phyl and Martin, intimidated, hurried, and as soon as they had finished eating, Martin went upstairs for his work. Phyl put her scarlet shawl round her shoulders and went out into the front garden. It was a lovely evening, and quite cloudless ; the deep August blue had turned to a golden haze, which was fading now above the shoulders of the grave and homely down. For a month Phyl had loved these wise, quiet evenings ; to-night she was impatient of the calm ; her thoughts turned at once to the beach under the cliff. " If life were really like that . . . " she thought, and recaptured, with the emulous longing of that moment, the physical sensation of Martin's hand over hers. Ever since he had let her hand go she had been thinking of, caring for the boys ; had buttered buns, encouraged, corrected, kept her temper, while at the back of her mind something was asking, Well, what then ? what then ? Now, in the first silence, in one word came the answer : Martin ; and that she saw quite clearly was the answer to the questions she had asked under the oak leaves at Bodium—why she had found happiness in an absurd little house in Eastbourne, how beauty dwelt with the Stag-at-Eve over the

mantelpiece and earwigs in the bath-mat. I love him, thought Phyl with pride and humiliation, with pain and joy, and then, remembering their happy days, but it *is* friendship ; and, though she didn't like Charles Lamb, his phrase came to her : *Friendship lit by passion,* and she knew that he was right. What shall I do, hate it or be glad of it ? call it a beauty or a sin ? she wondered, and let her thoughts wander back over the month and its awakenings, the first evening in the kitchen when she had seen tea things as a poet saw them ; the morning when she had come up the hill from shopping and noticed the shadows of the stones in the road ; her return to her pre-war philosophies ; her new pity for Julian. Could it be a bad or a silly thing that had so changed her? She didn't think so, yet disquietening, cheapening words occurred to her—" a married woman's infatuation for her sons' tutor . . . " " Dangerous ages." No, she said to herself, that's nonsense ; that sort of thing goes with cream cakes and pink wrappers ; it doesn't bring the whole world to life again. She searched for a simile, saw this love thrown, like a golden star, into the muddle that her life was. I won't run away from it, she thought. But she wasn't a girl. She saw the end ; the good-bye at Eastbourne station, the hearty letter to the boys, the bowl of bulbs at Christmas, and, at the next Christmas, a card. For he's not a bit in love with me, she thought. It was simply friendliness that made him take my hand, and because we think the same way

about things. I'm thirty-three, and I've got a wrinkle between my eyebrows, and my hands are red, and he's not the sort of man who falls in love with married women ; and, anyhow, I've no S.A. Julian had told her that, and she had believed it ; and, though it had rankled terribly at the time, she was glad of it now. Perhaps I shall get back to friendship, she thought, looking out into the brown, downland evening ; after all, if it hadn't been for those people on the shore, I should have credited my happiness to the air of Eastbourne. I shall forget them, she thought, and this madness with them, and simply remember these brown evenings and the very pleasant friendship of two people with tastes in common who didn't bother about sex. I ought to try, thought conscientious Phyl, because there's Julian. But was there ? It was a long time since he had been her lover ; he didn't want her now except as the mother of his boys. Was it betraying that materialist to allow her friendship for Martin to be lighted by the thin, pale radiance of an unrequited love ? Honestly, yes ; but, as she owned it, Phyl realised that, right or wrong, the thing was done ; whether it were a star thrown into her life or a pathological infatuation for her sons' tutor, it was there, lighting her world, betraying Julian, making her happier and kinder, making her ashamed, a sin or a beauty, who on earth could say ?

And Phyl gave up her analysis, and, while the brown darkness closed in round the flimsy row of

houses, she sat out in the front garden indulging herself, treating herself, just this once, with thoughts of Martin. Little, homely things she thought of: how he stood with his hand on his hip when he was thinking, the way his hair went on end after swimming, his voice when he was trying to be serious, and there was a laugh in it, his endless patience with the boys when they were tiresome, his grave good-manners, his old, well-chosen ties, frayed shirts and shiny suits; and then of the way he treated her, jumping up to open doors, carrying parcels, noticing that she looked tired, doing all sorts of little things for the boys which he needn't have done, bringing her penurious presents —there had been a very small box of expensive chocolates from Brighton, her birthday sign in pottery from the art shop at Rye, and once, in a tea garden, a bunch of roses which he had bought when he went to pay for tea, carried across the lawn, looked at as if they were mud, presented with, "I got you these . . . " And she had been poor too; she knew what eighteenpence meant, and she could have cried . . .

It was almost dark now. Ethel came out of the house and went down the road to the pillar-box and came back again. Phyl opened the garden gate and let Pilgrim run out. While she waited for him, she calculated with some difficulty that the tide was falling; a few hours' time would uncover the beach under the cliff. She had never liked the moon; had classed it with waterfalls, grots and abysses as a stage property of the late eigh-

teenth-century poets ; but now she pictured with longing the austere black and argent of the soaring cliff, the flat sand and the cold seas. " If life were really like that ! . . . " she thought, and called the dog, and went into the front hall with the gong and the picture of the Blind Fiddler and umbrella stand.

She did not usually say good-night to Martin. But the dining-room door stood ajar, and through the gap she could see his duteous red head bent over his index slips. She called out, " Good-night, Martin ! " and saw him get up in a hurry and come to the door. " Good-night, Phyl," he said, standing there, looking tall under the gimcrack lintel and speaking with a note in his voice which she hadn't heard before, and which she wondered at. He sounds tired, she thought, going upstairs, going into her bedroom, sitting down at her mirror ; and then a better definition occurred to her : the noble word, fortitude.

CHAPTER X

WHY ?

NEXT day Martin took the boys to Clactonbury. They did not get back till bedtime, and during dinner he described the expedition to Phyl.

" It's very homely country back there," he said. " Sheep and church towers and low and brown barns patched and repatched and tattered. Very English and Sheila Kaye-Smithian and different from what we saw yesterday."

Phyl said nothing.

" Michael enjoyed it more than John did," he continued quickly. " John despises the past. I don't wonder when you think what's been made of ' England's green and pleasant land.' "

" But that's not why he despises it," said Phyl. " He despises it because there weren't any motor engines. I don't like the Romans any more than he does. But I dislike them because they brought us the idea of glory. I'm sure the Early Britons had no illusions about fighting. They just clawed and bit if you took their bones. But the Romans said that it was sweet and proper to die for one's country and put on golden helmets, and went out and killed someone."

Phyl was a pacifist. Martin wasn't. They embarked on a heated argument which lasted till the end of the meal. Then he followed her out into the garden, and sat on the drawing-room window ledge, stirring his coffee and looking into his cup.

"I've finished *The Surface of Our Earth*," he said, suddenly.

"Oh, have you?" said Phyl.

"Yes."

It was quite an extraneous monosyllable; he had already said that he had finished the index; but at the sound of it Phyl thought, something awful's going to happen. Her heart stood still, then pounded, and she felt a pulse begin to throb in her throat. With difficulty, she swallowed what was left of her coffee, and he took the empty cup from her hand.

"I shall have to think of something else to do in the evenings," he said. "I shall have to make cross-word puzzles or write a guide to the South Downs. In the meantime, could you come out now for a minute or two, do you think? I want to talk to you."

"How could I? Supposing the boys scream."

"Why should they? They've got nothing to scream for. Besides, we should hear them. I only meant just across the road. Everyone is sitting in his front garden. We can't talk here."

Phyl couldn't find any words. She got up, and Martin opened the gate for her, and she passed through, and up among the valerian to the road.

Is he going to give notice? she wondered, or tell me something awful about the boys? Perhaps I've offended him, or he wants to borrow money, or he's lost his sleeve-links and suspects Ethel of taking them, or he thinks that John's tubercular, or that Michael hasn't a nice mind. She crossed the road and climbed down until they could see the sea, a level floor stretched into the mists of the horizon, and yet had the house still in view.

"Is this all right?"

"Beautiful."

She was wearing a new dress, a diaphanous flowered chiffon, but she sat down quite recklessly on the close, downland grass. "Well," she asked sharply, "what's wrong?"

Martin sat down too.

"Nothing's wrong," he said. "Only I wondered if I ought to go away."

"Go away?" she echoed. "What on earth for?"

He was sitting beside her, his hands round his knees, looking clean and young and formal in his dinner jacket. He turned his head and smiled at her ruefully.

"Well, isn't it the proper thing to do—after yesterday? I mean, now you know what I feel?"

She stared at him.

"Phyl, don't be dense," he said. "It's not very easy for me. You make me think I'm doing the wrong thing. I should have left it."

" I'm sorry I'm dense," said Phyl, nettled. " But I don't know how you expect me to understand when you talk in this vague way."

Martin looked out to sea. She glanced at him and saw his face harden.

" I don't want to be vague," he said, disagreeably. " I was only trying to keep things possible. If you want it straight, well, now we know we love each other, aren't we asking for trouble if I stay on here ? "

Phyl burst into tears.

" Oh, damn it, don't," said Martin, " or I shall cry too."

After a moment, she controlled herself.

" I'm sorry. You see, I didn't know before about you."

" Didn't know ? Oh, Phyl, you are a lunatic. Why else did we hold hands ? "

" People do."

" Yes, in conservatories and taxis, but not in front of the most beautiful thing they've ever seen."

" I didn't think it was the conservatory sort. I thought it was because we like the same things and we both saw at once that it was beautiful."

" Well, we saw more than that, didn't we ? We saw what life might have been like. For us. At least, I did. And I thought you did. Do you love me ? "

" Yes."

" Well, say so, then."

" I love you, Martin."

They looked each other in the eyes.

" We oughtn't to," said Phyl, looking away with an effort that seemed physical.

" I know," said Martin. " ' Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife,' and all that."

" Is it terribly wrong ? "

" I don't know. I shouldn't think so."

" I always thought it wasn't wrong, but just mean."

" It doesn't strike me as very mean at present. Perhaps when your husband comes down we shall feel more that way. I rather feel that I've misjudged everyone whom this has happened to. Oh, God, Phyl, why didn't I find you before ? "

" I'm unlucky, you see. I always miss people at stations, and the parties I'm going to are always postponed."

" Well, it wouldn't have been any use," he told her. " I couldn't ever have married, even in the War. I've got my mother and sisters. It's hopeless now."

" I know. And I've got the boys."

" What are we to do ? "

" Don't go away. Why should you ? After all, it's mostly friendship. We can have each other's minds."

" Isn't that all eyewash ? I mean, I noticed that you were pretty long before I knew you had a mind."

Phyl blushed with pleasure.

" But you didn't love me then," she said, sensibly. " And I'm not as pretty as all that. There are millions and millions of people prettier, and younger, and with golden curls and things ; but you never get quite the same mind."

" I realise that. But you can't divide your feelings into two compartments labelled respectively, ' Body ' and ' Mind.' In a perfect love they're all mixed up together."

" Are you used to having perfect things ? " asked Phyl. " I'm not. Don't be an ass, Martin. Half a bun is better than no bun to a man who's starving, and we've starved a bit."

" Well, I don't want to go away," he said. " It's heavenly here with you. Only I thought perhaps you'd like me to. Otherwise I wouldn't have said anything. Oh, well, I suppose that's eyewash. For two long days I've been bursting to say ' I love you,' and I was jolly glad to find an excuse. That's nearer the truth. I say, isn't it difficult to think honestly about a thing like this ? "

" Awfully. All sorts of beautiful phrases occur to me. They sound lovely, and I long to say them ; but, just as I open my mouth, I realise that it's nothing but a timely sophistry. I wonder what Julian would say in my position ? "

" I'm not going to talk about him," said Martin. " It's going to be bad enough taking his cheques. I know we couldn't help it—well, one can't help stepping on a person's toe, but one's sorry. And when I think of him, I'm sorry for this. And, honestly, we couldn't help it."

"Of course not. It really happened the first evening, after the dog fight, when I bound up your poor hand. I had a marvellous feeling of having found a friend—too marvellous for what friendship means."

"And I felt terribly braced at having done something for you, Phyl. I wish I could look after you always. You're so easily squashed, you want someone to stand up for you. If I'd been able to make a home, would you have come to me?"

"Oh, I don't know. There would still have been the boys."

"Supposing you hadn't had them."

"I should hate not to have had them. What's the use of suppositions?"

He looked away from the sea, down over the suburbs of the town where lights were beginning to shine, sturdy, domestic stars in the inexplicable whirl of the planets' night.

"At moments," he said, "one weakly indulges in thoughts of what might have happened. In the still watches of the night, instead of turning over and shutting my eyes like a good boy, as you always say to John and Michael, I furnished a sitting-room for us, complete with *The Shropshire Lad* and the picture of sheep I saw at Rye. I didn't make a garden because I thought you would rather have lived in London and had two bay trees and painted the front door yellow, and gone to first nights and written things in the *London Mercury* about the Mediæval Stage."

"I should have. Only a front door sounds

rather massive. A top floor in Bloomsbury would have done us proud."

"It would have been fun, living together," he said. "And that's just how I love you, Phyl." He looked at the red roofs of the houses beneath them and said, "Damn you, Mr. and Mrs. Brown! You don't love each other as much as we do, and yet you're allowed to live together. But, 'not unto us, O Lord.'"

"Is there any plan to it?" she asked the hills.

Martin answered her. "There must be. Look at the times and seasons. And the law of gravity. And mathematics. They're obviously to plan."

"I think it's all chance."

"Well, then, why don't the stars fall down?"

"Probably they're just going to. We only live for a second of their time."

"For goodness sake, don't," he said, laughing. "I'm losing my hold on the finite." He stretched out his hand and touched, as an anchor, the airy folds of her frock. "What does it matter to midgets like us what the stars do? The infinite doesn't affect us. Rugby football and international diplomacy have a different set of rules."

"Yes. And we know too much about life to break its beastly rules." She said that firmly and quickly because at the touch of his hand she had felt an almost overpowering desire to throw herself into his arms. Rules . . . Playing the game . . . Julian . . . she said to herself, but all that seemed faint and chill and far away in com-

parison with the bright comfort of being loved. She looked at him helplessly, and, after some sort of struggle with himself, he withdrew his hand and stood up.

"All right," he said. "We'll keep them. We'll carry on as if we hadn't had this talk to-night. But I'm glad we had it, aren't you?"

"Yes. You see, I didn't know about you. And in a cold world it's comforting."

"I hope it is," he said. "And you never know. Perhaps some day . . . " Prebble must be nearer fifty than forty, and with such a tummy on him he didn't look to be a healthy man; and Mother, poor darling, couldn't go on for ever. But then there was Elsie. Still, lovers even more hopelessly parted had met in the evening of their days.

Phyl shook her head.

"I don't expect so. Still, it's something that we can go on being friends." She got up and held out her hand to him, and he took it. "What a friendly hand!" he said; and they went soberly down the hill.

Their resolution held. As far as active will was concerned, Phyl was the weaker vessel; but somewhere within her sensitive, defenceless mind was a hard kernel of obstinacy; thirteen years of Julian had beaten but not broken her. Summer darkness, the sight of luckier lovers, the erotic strains of the municipal band, she withstood with a sulky defiance aimed in some twisted way at Julian and not Martin; to betray one's enemy would be defeat indeed. Martin's point of view was

a simpler one. He didn't believe in the divinity of Christ, the immaculate conception or the resurrection of the body, but he trusted in a benevolent God ; he considered himself unmoral, but he believed in fresh air, long walks, dying for one's country, and telling the truth ; he said adultery wasn't a sin, but he thought it a betrayal ; he washed himself perpetually, drew the line at some stories that he heard, and was, in fact, a very respectable young man. The nature of his love for Phyl helped him ; it wasn't a love to sweep a man away, but it was deep and still, a worship rather than a passion, meat not wine. The idea of the mildest planning or contriving—of sending the boys on ahead or looking to see if Ethel had the kitchen door open—seemed a desecration, sickened him. He marvelled how love ever survived the technique of intrigue.

One way and another, then, they came to a happiness which, if it had its difficult moments, was a greater happiness than either had known. They understood each other perfectly ; a hundred times a day, over a joke, a prejudice, an aversion, a reverence, an enthusiasm, their eyes would meet. He told his troubles, for the first time in his life, without pretending to be brave ; told her that his father, an archæologist, had died of sunstroke in Egypt, leaving a young family without a penny ; that, as a result of an accident in childhood, his elder sister was an epileptic ; that his mother believed herself to be responsible, and had brooded and tormented herself until remorse had

become a monomania; that his younger sister, untrained for any profession and hampered by gentility, resentfully found employment in taking children for walks and contributed eighteen shillings a week to that unhappy household, of which, otherwise, he was the sole support. "Ruth's pretty," said Martin, "in a willowy sort of way, but for years she's done nothing but walk pudding-faced children into Kensington Gardens, and point out stamens and sepals. And then, poor darling, she gets on a bus and comes home with her feet aching—people who write charming little poems about Kensington Gardens don't think of girls like Ruth. And when she gets home, there's Elsie, very patient and clever, but all on edge, and mother terribly gloomy—the hopeless sort of gloom that lets the fire out and can't get the tea. Now Ruth's gone Bolshie, and I don't blame her, but, of course, mother's upset over it, and afraid she'll marry someone without a collar and a tie." And then he told her about the school, and how he hated the science master, and how a parent had written to complain about him, and how desperately he used to fear that he would lose control of his form. And he told her the plot of a novel he was thinking of writing, and showed her his report on the term's cricket in the school magazine.

Phyl didn't tell him all her troubles. She told him about her childhood, and how, for a long time after she had left Oxford, as she lay in bed at night, she could hear the hours chime from

Magdalen Tower. She described the horrid disillusionment of her first sight of "Lochaber," and revolted him with word pictures of Mrs. Thompson and her kind. She told him how the pipe under the scullery sink had frozen at Christmas, and how much she longed to look on Shelley's grave. And then there were the poets to discuss late into the sober brown evenings; and through the sunny days, for nature's lovers, her sounds and shapes and colours to adore.

On the last day of August, Julian arrived. Martin came up from the shore with the boys, and found him sitting with Phyl in the front garden, a dark, urban figure in his smooth town clothes. Martin said, "Hullo, sir!" and was surprised to find no difficulty in looking him in the eyes. Julian said, "Well, how are these rascals of mine?" Martin gave a polite laugh, said, "Very rascally," and went into the house. The boys threw themselves on their father, and the deck chair, in which he was sitting, trembled and creaked while they chattered of their exploits and shrieked questions about the car. The cheerful noise reached Martin, who had gone up to his bedroom to brush his wet hair. He realised that he hated the sight of Prebble; and he fed his hatred with thoughts of what Phyl must have suffered in thirteen years with this gross and stupid brute. In none of their exchanges of confidences had either of them mentioned Julian; and Martin, with a man's idea that in such matters a woman is more sensitive than a man, had imag-

ined with horror what it must be like for a woman to be married to a man whom she no longer loves. He couldn't give Julian credit even for virtues which cried aloud in him, not for generosity, though he had come loaded with presents, nor for good-fellowship, though he was the life and soul of the tea-table, nor for fatherly love. In fact, Martin was desperately jealous, and during tea he sat next to Michael, eating nothing, avoiding Phyl's eyes, and staring at the jam. "You're not eating much, Howard," said hospitable Julian, and Martin said shortly, "I never eat much tea." The boys shrieked out at that. "Coo!" said Michael. "What price your seven slices of bread and honey at Rye?" "And those buns in the baker's at Lewes?" said John. Martin said nothing, but silenced them with a glance of fury; and Julian paid no attention, but went on talking, without any assistance from the others, cheerily and heartily and sensibly, of this and that.

CHAPTER XI

" HOME'S WHERE YOU ARE . . . "

JULIAN had come to Eastbourne for two reasons : the first was his duty to his family, and the second was the fear that Phyl would smell a rat.

In anticipation, he had thought it a beastly nuisance, called it a fall from Paradise to earth ; but, now that he had actually arrived, he was surprised to find himself not only resigned but definitely pleased. The first joy was subsiding into a deck chair in the front garden, stretching out his legs, mopping his forehead, only needing to answer Phyl's wifely enquiries with grunts until he really felt like saying more. Then there were the boys ; apart from his pride and hope in them, he had always enjoyed their easy, uncultured company. Then there was his good, plain tea. For three weeks he had played the lover, and with Cynthia Bechler as his mistress that had meant the courtier, the sycophant, never the friend. He hadn't resented it, for her glove was velvet ; she was a very gracious tyrant ; while she tyrannized, she flattered, favoured and bestowed. Undoubtedly he loved her ; even here, in the front garden, the thought of her was wine ;

but you didn't always want wine; sometimes, especially after a surfeit of it, you preferred a cup of tea. "We won't dress for dinner to-night," he said, standing by Phyl and showing her what wanted mending, while she unpacked his clothes. Then he told her about a corn he had, in such a funny place, right under his toe; and how it hurt him; and she was sympathetic and suggested cures. And after dinner the tutor had the good sense to go and work at something in the dining-room, and Julian was able to sit out again in the front garden, taking the sea air and reading the newspaper, while Phyl sat beside him, mending, ready to appreciate any comment that he might make. Last came the greatest joy of all: to be able to undress and get straight into bed and turn over and shut his eyes and not bother if he snored. "Phyl," he said, with his face pressed into the pillow and his eyes shut, "It's good to be home." "But this isn't really home," said Phyl. "Home's where you are, my dear," said Julian, and fell asleep.

The next day was Sunday. Martin took the boys to bathe before breakfast, and Phyl went too. It was a glorious morning, and not easy to leave the sunny water and matutinal air. When they got back to the house, Julian was out on the road, looking hungry and annoyed.

"I nearly began without you," he said in angry tones.

Martin hurried the boys along.

"You've been bathing with the boys for three

weeks," said Julian to Phyl. " You might have waited this once to bathe with me."

" Oh, dear, how idiotic of me," said Phyl, and, with unwonted graciousness, " I'd love to bathe with you. I didn't wake you up this morning because you looked so tired last night, and you were so sound asleep. Let's have one together later on."

Julian thought, poor old Phyl! she's awfully pleased to have me here. Being without me has taught her a lesson—made her value me more. He didn't guess that he meant as little to her now as a stranger, that she didn't care what he thought or said or did any more than if he were a casual acquaintance and so could afford him the same indifferent courtesy.

" All right," he said, " when we've digested our breakfasts—eleven o'clock-ish." He took her arm, and realised that she was tanned to a lovely golden brown, like the flappers—being pre-war, he thought of them as " bits of fluff "—along the promenades, and the women at St. Juan and on the Lido. " You've acquired the fashionable tan, I see," he said, surprised that frumpish Phyl should have acquired anything fashionable. She said, " Yes," and threw back her bathing wrap to show him her neck and shoulders. Her damp bathing dress clung to her boyish figure, and he couldn't help comparing it unfavourably with his magnificent Cynthia's ; but, for the first time in many years, he noted the perfection of Phyl's small features, the delicate chiselling of her low brow, short nose

and pointed chin. He thought, of course she's pretty, prettier than Cynthia, but nobody notices it, because she's got no S.A. "You look jolly well here, Phyl," he said. "I suppose it's the air." And Phyl blushed suddenly and brightly, and said that she supposed so, too.

She didn't take long to dress, but Martin was down before her. He was telling Julian about the tides when she came in, and at once he lost the thread of his discourse, and began to wait on her. Julian couldn't stand fuss at breakfast. He folded the *Observer*, propped it up against the cruet; tutor or no tutor, he was at home. But he couldn't help hearing what was going on, on the other side of the barrier. "Is that all right for you . . . ?" "Can I pass you anything . . . ?" "Shall I take that away for you . . . ?" "Oh, thanks awfully . . ." "Thanks . . ." It occurred to him that there was something to be said for having a wife who was frumpish and without sex appeal; it would have been courting disaster to send a woman like Cynthia Bechler to live for two months at the seaside vis-à-vis with this attentive young man.

They all went down to the shore together, and they were half-way along the shingle to their tent when Phyl remembered that she had left her bathing dress hanging out on the line. She was walking ahead with Julian, and he said, "Tch, tch. Still as bad as ever. I should have thought that, with the boys off your hands and a competent cook like Ethel, you might at least

remember your own things." Phyl didn't answer. She waited for Martin and the boys, and then she said, " Oh, Martin, I've forgotten my bathing dress." Martin said, " I'll get it. Where is it ? " and stood looking down at her with a betraying tenderness in his eyes. Julian noticed that. He didn't understand it, but, when Martin was out of earshot, he said, " Fancy you calling that fellow by his Christian name ! "

Phyl was a poor prevaricator, but she was annoyed to hear Julian speak of Martin as " that fellow." She said nonchalantly, " Oh, well, everyone uses Christian names now."

Her answer stung Julian. After all, it was he who was Chelsea, free, bohemian modern ; Phyl was a suburban matron, respectable, *démodée*, dull.

" I know that," he said tartly. " But that's among one's equals."

" Martin is my equal."

" Technically, I daresay. But here he's in a different position. I'm employing him."

" And you can't forget it for a minute. You *are* a snob."

" I am, am I ? " began Julian, and Phyl was glad to see that somehow a red herring had been drawn across the trail. She didn't guess that, in spite of it, something stuck in Julian's mind, either because he was of a generation to which the use of Christian names did argue intimacy, or because Martin's face, when he had looked at her, had subconsciously instructed him. He wasn't

suspicious. Phyl was always doing stupid things like giving tramps slices of bread and butter and making friends in trains. And when Martin came toiling along the shingle with the bathing dress and said " Catch ! " and threw it at Phyl, Julian only thought the tutor's manner was familiar, and no wonder, and decided at the first opportunity to pull him up.

Phyl went into the tent to undress. Martin sat by Julian and looked at the sea, and said nothing. Then Phyl came out to them. She sat down by Martin and took off her wrist-watch and told him to look after it. Julian went into the tent. Through the canvas he could hear them talking in a slow, intimate way, between long pauses, about Conrad's descriptions of the sea. He was glad when he was ready to go out and interrupt them, and take Phyl's arm and hurry her down to the water.

Martin wouldn't watch Phyl and Julian bathe. He turned over and lay on his stomach with his head on his arms. For safety, he had put Phyl's watch on his left wrist, and in a sentimental mood he laid his cheek against it while he thought and thought of her. The boys came up from the shore and nudged him and said, " When can we bathe ? " and " Oh, Mr. Howard, do let us, soon ! " but he didn't take any notice of them, didn't move. Only when John said, " Here's Daddy coming out of the water: perhaps we can bathe now," he sat up and said rather heavily, " You'd better ask your father if he'd like to see you dive." The boys jumped up and ran towards Julian, and Martin

watched him coming up the beach between them, a white-skinned, heavily built, hirsute man. " When I'm dressed . . . " he told them.

Phyl said, " Aren't you going to have a sun bath ? " It was not, really, a very hot day. The sun was out, but there was a strong wind blowing ; white horses flecked the sea. Julian was shivering ; he knew that he wasn't sunburned, and that he looked pinched and cold, that his figure didn't do him any credit, that his thinning hair had lost its parting and lay in damp streaks on his forehead ; and he felt as he always did in a bathing dress, self-conscious, and worried if it clung. He was savagely irritated by Phyl as she stood, bronzed, bare-limbed and unembarrassed, not a day over five-and-twenty, with the salt water running down her face, the sun in her eyes, and the wind in her permanently-waved hair.

" I'm not going to loll about the beach with nothing on, if that's what you mean," he said. " I think it looks appalling. It ought not to be allowed." Phyl busied herself with spreading her towel out. She didn't say anything, she didn't even look at Martin, but she might just as well have done so, for he knew her mind.

When Julian re-appeared, fully dressed, Martin said, " I'll go in with them. When our pessimist dives, if there isn't anyone standing by to grab him, he gets the feeling that he may never come up again." John said, " Isn't he a baby ? " and Martin said, " Shut up, John. You were frightened when you got a fishbone in your throat." Julian said,

" Michael must get out of that silliness. I shouldn't have given way to him." Martin thought, Fool and Brute, but he caught sight of Michael's small, imploring face, and he said temperately, " Oh, well, I daresay it's best to have someone hanging round."

Julian was pleased with the boys' diving. He said to Martin, " By Jove! you *have* brought them on." Martin was a magnificent swimmer, and Julian, thorough sportman that he was, admired him for that. He said warmly, " I congratulate you on what you've done with them in this short time," but Martin didn't look flattered. He said, " Oh, well, they are good material," and left Julian, and climbed along to the end of the breakwater, and sat there alone.

The day wore on. One after another, little things impressed Julian, Martin's moods, his abrupt changes from sulkiness to gaiety, his deference to Phyl—young men's manners weren't as good as all that, nowadays—the transformation of Phyl herself, the way she ordered Martin about, her eyes when she looked at him, their voices when they said good-night. But Julian was not an imaginative man, and not easily could he shake off ideas once imbedded in the rock of his mind. For many years he had been out of love with Phyl, physically and mentally tired of her, and never had it occurred to him that a romantic future apart from him could exist for this weary, dulled woman, whose peculiar, childish stupidities alone preserved her from premature middle-age.

Martin seemed to him years younger than Phyl, though actually there was but a couple of months between them ; and, though he knew that men did fall in love with women ten, twenty years their seniors, that was because the women were vamps—Greta Garbos or Tallulah Bankheads—not exhausted mothers and housewives like poor Phyl. He was irritated by the tutor's fancy manners—this jumping up and down was all very well when you were out at a party, but it was positive ostentation here in the home. And Phyl seemed to forget that the man had been engaged as a tutor ; she let him do all sorts of things for her, even asked him to do them, that were quite outside his province ; and Julian couldn't decide whether that meant that she was treating him like a very close friend or like a servant ; either, of course, was wrong. Then all this undergraduate sort of chat about books annoyed him ; he was a publisher, and, if anyone in the house knew anything about books, it was himself. In fact, it was all very tiresome, but what could one do ? One had to have someone, and if one had decided on a governess, ten to one she would have talked as much and failed to manage the boys. Almost a week had passed before Julian understood.

It was a very hot day. Martin was in a bad temper. He had proposed to take the boys for a tea pic-nic on the Downs ; the tea was packed in a haversack and the boys were at the gate with ash sticks in their hands and earnest expressions on their faces, when Julian said what on earth

did they want to walk about in the heat for? he would take them further than they could possibly get by walking, in the car. John was pleased. Michael was bitterly disappointed. "We don't get there ourselves if Daddy drives us in the car." Martin felt like Michael. To sit at the back of the car while Julian drove faultlessly along the high roads bored him to extinction, and it was worse than boring when Phyl came and sat beside Julian with a map, mistaking the roads and getting scolded for her pains. She made an extraordinarily stupid mistake this afternoon, took them miles out of their way; and Julian stopped the car and snatched the map from her, saying Good God! was she such a fool that she didn't know her right hand from her left? Phyl said nothing, and Martin, sitting behind and sweating, with a hot boy on either side of him, and the sun beating down on the roof of the car, was overpowered by a sudden surge of fury which seem to burst from his heart and flood his body and his brain. If any words had come to him, he must have used them, but, though he was normally too talkative to please Julian, a straight left was all that occurred to him now. He controlled himself. This was England, nineteen-hundred-and-twenty-nine. You couldn't hit a man because he called his wife a fool. You could only sit for miles and miles of sun-burned Sussex landscape behind his beastly white neck, and brood over your barren hatred for him and your barren love for her, while your hired tongue answered their son's

questions about engines, and told them over and over again to sit still.

Julian chose a place for tea. While Phyl unpacked it, he went with the boys to try to locate a squeak in the car. Martin helped Phyl to unpack. All at once she panicked, rummaging wildly among the paper in the tea-basket and saying, " Good heavens, Martin ! there's no sugar for his tea ! " Then Martin did a foolish, inconsistent thing. He said, " But, my darling, there is. I saw it." He had called her " my dear " and " angel," but never " darling," and she was suddenly still, with her hands among the paper in the tea-basket. He looked at her hands first, then into her eyes, where he saw sorrow marvellously comforted. With a feeling that his soul had gone before him, he leaned across the tea-basket and kissed her mouth, his tenderness changing to the passion he had hitherto so vigorously repressed, while his lips were still on hers. Hearty voices caused him to spring guiltily away. He turned his back to Phyl, smoothed his hair, and, feeling cheap and deceitful, he saw the boys and their father approach through the low bushes that hid the road. " Hullo ! " said Julian. " Tea not ready yet ? That spirit lamp of yours is no use at all. We've found the squeak." Expecting an intelligent interest, he looked at Martin, but Martin looked away, didn't speak, wouldn't eat anything. He was furious with himself for kissing Phyl, because kissing her had meant jumping away like a futile schoolboy at the sound of voices, because he hadn't been sufficiently

master of his fate to go on kissing her under Julian's nose and be damned to him. God! he thought contemptuously, what an inconsistent fool! I've had weeks in which to kiss her, and I've held off until the most bathetic moment with a tea basket between us and her husband on the other side of a bush. Phyl said, "Well, anyhow, have a cup of tea, Martin." Being a woman, she hadn't given a thought to deceit nor the tea basket; in spite of his scruples and hers, Martin had kissed her; she smiled on Julian and could have hugged the boys.

They drove home. The boys went to bed and called Julian up to say good-night to them. Martin and Phyl began to do their accounts, the expenses incurred in taking the boys about, which Martin paid out of his own pocket, and Phyl refunded at the end of every week. This was a lengthy proceeding, and the result dubious in the extreme, for Martin generally forgot some important item and Phyl would suddenly shriek out, "What about tea at that place where the wasps were?" and John would have to be called in to remember how many cakes had been consumed. Often Martin went down to the shops for something Phyl had forgotten, and then she would ask him to keep the change because she hadn't a pocket, and he would forget all about giving it back until the accounts wouldn't balance. They knew what was before them now, so they repaired to the drawing-room and sat down at the gimcrack table where they sometimes played whist with the boys.

" I think it's all right this week," said Martin, taking half a sheet of notepaper from his pocket-book. He had indeed been specially careful because of Julian.

" I expect you've done yourself out of something," said Phyl. " Did you remember that you paid for my films being developed ? "

" Oh, no ; I forgot that," he confessed. " Let's see, that was two-and-fourpence. It wasn't half-a-crown as usual, because they didn't print the one you took of your thumb."

Phyl added two shillings and fourpence to the existing total of eighteen shillings and sevenpence.

" I'm afraid it's been rather an expensive week," said Martin apologetically. " You see, though your . . . their father has paid for the teas since Saturday, there was that one tea at Bobby's, when we ate three shillings worth of éclairs. And then there was the handkerchief I bought for John at Battle when he didn't take one. Hullo ! I haven't got that down."

" How much was it ? "

" Ninepence."

" That's twenty-two-and-eightpence."

" Well, I don't know how that's happened," said Martin. " I started the week with only a pound note."

Phyl began to draw patterns on the list.

" I expect it's all right," she said.

" You needn't think I'm going to cheat you out of two-and-sevenpence," said Martin. " Cast

your mind back to Saturday, September the first. Did you give me any money for anything ? "

" I don't think so. I only gave Ethel tenpence-three-farthings for the bread."

" I know ! " said Martin triumphantly. " It was the bathing cap you got us to buy for you at Bobby's. You gave me five shillings for it, and it was only two-and-six."

" Well, that brings it down to a pound and twopence again."

" There can't be anything else, surely. Perhaps you've added it up wrong."

As he said that, Julian came down the stairs and into the room. " What's this ? " he asked, taking his pipe from his pocket and beginning to fill it. " Your Friday evening struggle with the petty cash ? "

Martin looked up at him.

" It's not a struggle," he said, shortly. " We're tuppence out, that's all."

" Let me recommend an audit of my wife's figures," said Julian. " Like map-reading, arithmetic, even in its most elementary form, is not among her many accomplishments. But I expect you've discovered it from experience."

There was nothing in that. Phyl was hopeless at figures, and she and Martin had often laughed together over her mistakes. It wasn't Julian's words which infuriated Martin, though his reference to map-reading had been tactless enough. It was his manner as he stood there filling his pipe, burly, obstuse, commonplace, possessing and criti-

cising the timid and rare mind that Martin knew and loved.

" I've discovered nothing of the sort," said Martin rudely. " Whenever there's been a mistake, it has turned out to be mine."

The statement was so untrue that Phyl stopped scribbling and stared at him in amazed curiosity ; but what struck Julian was not that Martin was lying, but the contrast of the way he spoke with his previous politeness, and the savage tone in his usually pleasant voice. Julian did not know a man in love when he saw one, but he knew a man in a rage ; and here was his sons' tutor absolutely furious because he had half-humorously criticised his own wife. He looked down at Martin's flushed face, and suddenly, as if a match had been set to stored fuel, all the odd little things he had noticed, not understood but retained in his mind, broke into a conscious, flaming thought. Good God ! The fellow's in love with her ! He didn't say anything, but felt in his pocket for his lighter and lit his pipe. That done, he thought, how extraordinary ! in a world full of smart young girls to fall in love with Phyl ! He looked at Phyl and saw that her eyes were turned to Martin. She loves him too, or thinks she does, he thought. He said, quite coolly, " Then her arithmetic must have improved somewhat. I'm glad of it," and left the room. He went into the front garden and sat down in a deck chair.

Martin didn't look at Phyl. He said, " I'm quite sure that a pound is all you owe me." His voice

was serious. Phyl took a pound note from her bag and handed it to him. He said, " Thank you," and went upstairs. He sat down on his bed with his hands in his pockets, and stared at the pattern, green on white, of the linoleum, and called himself all the worst names he could think of, and hoped that he hadn't given the show away. He didn't think he had. Prebble had given him a very nasty look, but that was the least you could expect from a man who had been cheeked by his boys' tutor in his own drawing-room. He was, Martin judged, an extraordinarily dense man, didn't know anything about the human heart, would probably credit his outburst to the heat, liver or natural impertinence. It's all right this time, Martin told himself, but it mustn't happen again, nor what happened this afternoon either, and he put his hand over his eyes and shut out the green triangles and the fumed oak suite and the pink distemper and the view over Eastbourne, and saw Phyl's face against a calm, vague, rural background, and kissed her again and again.

Julian, in the garden, was also thinking of Phyl. He thought, the whole thing's ridiculous, and he saw Phyl moving about the kitchen at " Lochaber " in her brown overall and easy shoes. He thought, she's not far off thirty-four, and looks it ; she's got no poise, can't talk, can't dress, she contradicts people flat, never sets out to attract anyone, can't get on with Thompson or Bailey or old Ritchie or even that fellow from ' Clovelly,' who's supposed to be such a lady's man. With a

pang of some emotion that he didn't define then, he allowed that Martin might attract a woman; although he had red hair, he was well set-up, slender but muscular. But that would be a young woman, a girl, not a woman like Phyl, who had been married so long, who had two big boys and a good husband, and thirteen years of cooking and dusting and shopping and taking temperatures and rubbing chests and emptying slops and drying ears and sewing on buttons, solid like a wedge between her and youth's erotic dreams. But there it was, though it might be ridiculous, and it might be wicked—might be! it *is* wicked, he thought; it's revolting in the mother of those boys. That brought him to the plain question, how far have they gone? Well, he reflected, the young man looks a healthy, sensual sort of animal; but he knew his Phyl. She wasn't the sort to get carried away, and although she wasn't religious, and her want of ordinary moral sense had often shocked him, she had a queer, contrary sort of fastidiousness which made her just as "proper" as, or even more "proper" than, anybody else in the end. Delicacy did not constrain him from thinking further that the boys had sharp eyes, and were hanging round all day, that the house was small, and every word you said could be heard all over it, that the passage floor creaked abominably, and that Ethel slept in. And Phyl hasn't a penny of her own, he thought with a certain satisfaction, and neither has he; if only from a financial standpoint, they wouldn't take any

risks. And suddenly Julian experienced a sense of power which made him stretch his arms and brought a smile to his mouth ; he wasn't only the husband, he was the employer. I'll send the fellow packing, he thought : chuck him out. In the morning I'll pay him and tell him to be out of the house by twelve o'clock ; and if he asks for a reason, he'll get it, and damn straight too. And that will end your little romance, my girl. He really believed so. He wasn't as stupid as Martin thought him. Though he didn't notice the things that Martin noticed—wayside flowers, the spark of greatness in Michael, birds on branches, the general trend of modern literature—he had noticed enough to find Martin out. But he was stupid in this : he didn't yet understand that, although his wife had remained technically true to him, and would probably continue to do so, he had lost her utterly through the greater and far more irrevocable infidelity of the mind. He might send her lover packing, take her home to "' Elsfield," eat with her, sleep with her ; but he wouldn't possess her any more than he possessed the wild birds in his garden ; he wouldn't be nearer than the women she talked to at tea-parties. He didn't understand that, and, therefore, he wasn't unhappy. The romantic affection which he believed Phyl had bestowed on Martin had faded from their marriage so long ago—and a good thing too : he hadn't any use for moonshine—that he could scarcely lay claim to it ; and, now that he had thought it out and settled the end of it, her part in the

affair seemed to him like a fit of hysterics, just silly and futile and discreditable and needing firm treatment, that was all. He felt angry with Martin, but no more angry than a man can be who has his enemy completely under his heel. The names by which he thought of him were names like " whipper-snapper " and " jackanapes " and " silly young ass " ; and, as he went upstairs to get ready for dinner, it was not without pleasure that he searched for the phrases he should use in " chucking him out " next day.

Martin found conversation at dinner difficult. Julian was silent, and Martin could not know that he was wondering if he could better, " Here is your cheque, Mister Howard. You will notice that it is made out for a fortnight's salary. I shall be glad if you will clear out of my house in as short a time as possible ; your conscience will tell you why." Phyl bravely compared Eastbourne with Brighton, and tried to get up a discussion on the merits of the respective piers. When the meal was over, Martin stayed in the dining-room, and Phyl and Julian took their coffee as usual in the garden. After a little desultory conversation about the probable temperature of the evening, Julian said, " I'm thinking of sacking that fellow in the morning."

Phyl put her coffee-cup down. She found her handkerchief and wiped her mouth before she said quite calmly, " What fellow ? "

" Howard."

' Oh, why ? "

He could not help feeling a spasm of disdainful pity at her over-acted unconcern.

" Well," he said, " I've nothing against him as tutor. He's done marvels with the boys. What I don't like about him is his attitude to you."

Phyl thought, oh, Martin, you fool! you let him see it; and then, for she knew Julian, she thought, well, he doesn't know what sort of thing it is. She glanced sharply at him. He was looking quite complacent, not like a man who is going to accuse his wife of adultery, and she thought, then he thinks it's a sort of beastly Edwardian flirtation. That annoyed her so much that she was tempted to blurt out the truth, but she managed to say lightly, " What *is* his attitude to me? I'd love to know."

" I should have thought you did," said Julian. " I certainly believe that you're to blame. You're thirty-three, and, if you don't know your world now, you ought to. You treated this young man with the most unsuitable familiarity, and it's your fault that he now believes he's in . . . " To Julian's surprise, the word " love " stuck hopelessly. " . . . that he cares for you."

" Well," said Phyl flippantly, " now I come to think of it, I believe *you're* to blame. You should have come down and spent your week-ends keeping us in order, instead of spending them—well, you know where . . . "

She didn't often make remarks of that type; but Mrs. Thompson did—where were you off to in such a hurry on Saturday evening Mr. Prebble?

Well, perhaps you'll tell me when your wife isn't listening—and they always put Julian in a good humour, and she wanted him in a good humour now. His last speech had indicated her only possible course; revolting though it was, she must own to Edwardian naughtiness and be forgiven.

She looked at Julian to see the effect of her words.

It was not what she had expected.

Julian had spent the last two week-ends with Cynthia Bechler in a Cotswold village. The place had swarmed with Americans. Cynthia was a woman who attracted attention; people got into conversation with her, and she couldn't resist impressing them with a revelation of her identity. It's all very well for her, Julian had thought; she's got nothing to lose; the British public likes its artists immoral; but he had been often on thorns. Thank God, most of the people *are* Americans, and they'll go back to their America and tell how they had the privilege of speaking to Cynthia Bechler, and forget everything about the man who was with her, except that she wasn't married to him. But on the last Sunday morning, just as he and Cynthia had come out from the hotel into the main street, she had touched his arm and said, "Look! Friends of yours!" "Where?" he had said, "Where?" She had pointed. A touring car had flashed by. An arm was still waving. He could see the brim of a brown Homburg hat. The Thompsons? The Ritchies?

The Baileys? Sir Curtis and Lady Fayre? Who in God's name could it be? "What make of car was it?" he had demanded. "My dear," she had drawled, "I can't tell one car from another, you know that." For the first time in their association he had snapped at her. "Surely you know a Morris from a Daimler?" He had gained nothing by his rudeness, indeed it had cost him fifteen guineas for an oil painting, by a local artist, of sheep on the Cotswold hills.

And now Phyl saw his face change, its complacency wiped off, its colour fade, its muscles slacken, a horrible physical translation of what was passing in his mind. A casual observer could not have failed to read in that face surprise, guilt and fear; and in the abrupt silence which her words had brought about, Phyl's sensitive mind could feel his embarrassment, just as she had felt Martin's in this same garden less than a week ago. She thought, incoherently, so he *was* somewhere . . . and suddenly hated herself for having found him out. She wouldn't sit there and see his poor face telling his secrets. She said, "I'll just go and get my knitting," and went indoors.

Julian sat quite still, staring in front of him. His mind was still reiterating foolishly: she knows, she knows. He tried to pull himself together, and then his first thought was, damn Cynthia. If she's been the sort of girl one could have taken to a quiet place—a farmhouse or lodgings over the post-office—this wouldn't have

happened. But it's no use thinking about that or worrying over who told Phyl ; the question is, what will she do ? She's in love with that fellow, and what she'll do is to divorce me and marry him ; and at that, it seemed to Julian that his heart cried out with anguish in his breast. Without a doubt he was tired of Phyl ; deliberately he had loved elsewhere ; but there was more to marriage than love, and he hadn't meant to cut adrift from her. Home was where she was ; she was his family no less than the sons she had borne him ; he had never thought of the future without thinking of her ; like his name and his face and his nationality, she had seemed unassailably his. Hitherto he had ardently supported legislation in favour of easier divorce : get a good, clean divorce and have done with it ! he had cried ; but now he saw a law every bit as cruel as any that bound together an ill-assorted couple, a law which, in revenge for two trumpery week-ends in the Cotswolds with a woman he didn't really care a damn for, was to sever him for ever from his wife and his home and his boys. He had been married for thirteen years, thirteen years of a domesticity which, if it hadn't been perfect—and it hadn't, nowhere near it—had been human, intimate and warm, a thing of monumental proportions, made up, as the solidest things are, of a host of little things—fireside evenings, weeding the lawn, playing bears with the children, staying indoors with a cold, eating, sleeping—for which he felt what an old dog feels for his basket or an old sailor for the

sea. Beside it, his passion for Cynthia Bechler had been little more than a function of the body, the spiritual effect of which was the vague pleasure he had experienced when he had found himself at home and at his ease again. With agony he realised that what tragedy ensued would bring its sting with it ; he had sold his birthright for a mess of pottage.

Phyl came from the house. She did not bring her knitting. Instead of searching for it, she had stayed upstairs in her bedroom, standing at her window, looking over the town, seeing nothing, pitying Julian ; for there's nothing in the world so pathetic, she thought, as a tyrant when the tables are turned. Underdogs like Martin and I get hardened, but poor Julian collapsed like a pricked balloon, like a fat man in a siege. She understood the position : he's afraid that I'll divorce him and take the boys ; his week-ends were just meant for an interlude. Although to Julian's mind she was " proper," she wasn't shocked, grieved nor insulted ; you couldn't throw stones unless you were without sin yourself, even though you had sinned in much better taste. She was sorry for him as she would have been sorry for a stranger whom she had embarrassed by inadvertently unearthing his family skeleton. Nevertheless, she saw her power. And it frightened her. She didn't want to become a tyrant in her turn. I'll forget it, she thought, like I used to forget the scandals of Canberry Gardens on the way home after tea. She turned from the window and

went downstairs. Julian's face was more composed ; but he looked desperately unhappy, and, as she approached, his expression changed ; he looked afraid. He was thinking, she's going to have it out, and was surprised when she sat down and pulled her red shawl round her and said that the best of September was that you could cool off at night. He thought : she's too dam' cunning, or else he is ; she only let me know what she's got up her sleeve because I said I'd sack the fellow. She won't say a word more till she's got back to London and seen a solicitor. " Yes, it's a very healthy month," he said, " a good month for a holiday " ; and Phyl said, " I hope the weather will last till we've moved into ' Elsfield.' When we moved into ' Lochaber ' we had a wet day." They talked about the new house and about getting John off to school. At the end of that, Phyl said quietly, " Martin meant to go over everything he's taught John in the course of next week. I think you'll be making a mistake if you get rid of him." Julian felt within him a bright, cold hatred, not for Phyl—left alone, she'd have put up with anything—but for Martin. He muttered, " Very well, I'll leave it," and Phyl got up and said, " Well, good-night," and went into the house. Julian listened, heard a door open, and voices. I can't stand it ! wailed his mind, but not before his body was out of the deck chair and across the tiny lawn. He saw his wife standing with perfect propriety at the dining-room door, and heard her say that Michael had better not

bathe more than once to-morrow, while Martin stood at the other side of the table and said, " Well, perhaps not." It was, as Julian saw it, a mild, banal scene ; and Phyl only saw Martin ; but Martin himself was facing the door, and he saw, at Phyl's shoulder, Julian's face, of which he thought : it's scarcely human—that's stupid ; it *is* human, only humanity doesn't often come to that. What he had seen was a passion of hatred, hatred that wanted to kill, worse than the faces of men in bayonet fighting. When the door had shut, and he was alone, he thought : it couldn't be. It was a trick of light, or my imagination. A man like Prebble couldn't feel like that. He's stupid and he's gross, but he's the sort that sits on its emotions—your conventional, cold-blooded Englishman. Besides, hang it all ! he's a public school-fellow. And that was hell let loose, thought Martin.

CHAPTER XII

THE SUPER-MAN

THE last week at Eastbourne passed quietly, and on the Friday evening Martin went back to London. He gave Phyl the two books which he had lent her on their first evening, pushing them into her hand as he carried his suit-case downstairs. They parted under Julian's eye, but they had had a few seconds together earlier in the day, time for a stammered, " May I come and see you sometimes, or would you rather I didn't ? Honestly, Phyl ? " and, " Oh, do come, Martin. I can't bear it if you don't." Then John's voice had called, " Mr. Ho-ward ! Mr. Ho-ward ! What about bathing ? " and Julian's, " Phyl ! Where are you, Phyl ? ' And Martin had said, " Write to me," and just touched her hand.

The Prebbles travelled back in their car on Monday and stayed at a private hotel until their new home was ready. " Elsfield " was not a large house, but the rooms were very much bigger than the rooms at " Lochaber," and it was necessary to buy new carpets and curtains, and furniture for a second maid's room and the boys' sitting-room. Phyl had not enjoyed house-hunting, but

since she had chosen this useful square house she had returned to an earlier mood; and she enjoyed putting up book-cases over the rosebuds and ribbons of her predecessors, buying blue-and-white china—"*white plates and cups clean-gleaming, Ringed with blue lines*"—staining the cheap deal floors and covering them with old Persian rugs, repeating that grave blue and plum-colour in hand-woven materials for the curtains and chair covers. Walter Bailey came to dinner, looked round the drawing-room, and said, "I congratulate you, Mrs. Prebble. It looks more like a study on Boars' Hill than a suburban drawing-room. I feel I've only to draw back the curtain to see '*the line of festal light in Christ Church hall.*'" Julian didn't think much of Phyl's taste, but he had most amiably indulged it; day by day his fears were abating; a woman who meant to divorce her husband and break up her home wouldn't go to ten shops in London and then down to Godalming to find a cretonne which exactly matched a triangle of colour he could scarcely distinguish among the host of others in a Bokhara rug. He began to think that his first surmise had been correct, that Martin's infatuation for Phyl had been as transient as his own for Cynthia. And that was all over now. Since his return from Eastbourne she had come to his office once, and they had lunched together; and on another afternoon he had seen her off to Italy, where she was to spend the winter. He had always thought that it would be awkward and difficult to discard

a mistress ; he had expected tears and reproaches and hysterical invitations to Rome. None came. Her success with him had flattered her ; to have stirred this cold, plain man argued her irresistible, and she had visions of a Roman springtide and the Italian nobility at her feet. But though he had been her lover, and their love was ashes, and the sight of him bored and embarrassed her, he was still her publisher, and a new contract was in the making. So she had smiled at him, and murmured, " Till April," and, as the train drew out of Charing Cross Station, she had buried her face in the flowers he had brought her—pink carnations ; they had been twopence a bloom cheaper than red roses at a florist's in the Strand. And Julian had gone home and found Phyl sitting in the room that looked like a study on Boars' Hill, reading poetry under a lamp so shaded that it left the firelight to flicker on the backs of the books, a scene which brought the days of his courtship back into his mind. He had tried to say so, but no words had come, so he had sat down beside her, and asked what she was reading. Then he had made two discoveries : that she would not let him touch her, and that she would not discuss books with him. He had been unbearably mortified, hated her books ; every time that he saw her read felt that she communed with her lover. Yet he heard her order Christmas puddings, suggest a children's party, even plan next summer's holiday ; either young Howard had made no substantial declaration or Phyl had felt,

like himself, the terrible solidity that the years give to the marriage tie. Temporarily, he accepted her reservations, but the knowledge that a young and virile man had been infatuated with her had given her mentally and physically a new value ; and he wasn't going to be made a fool of for ever. In the meantime, he ceased from worrying, and occupied his mind almost entirely with his work.

Martin came to see Phyl one very wet November afternoon. She showed him over the house—Julian hadn't guessed that this was the moment for the joy of which she had gone to ten London shops and to Godalming. Martin didn't like the house itself, but he thought Phyl's taste wonderful ; and he noticed, without having it pointed out to him, that the view from the landing window was a view of the plains of Italy. Then they had tea by the fire, among the books, with the blue curtains drawn, earth's importunate messages shut out by the staid hands of Women Weavers. Michael came in, fresh from the manifold injustices of school, whooped with joy at the sight of Martin, and entered into Paradise, sitting on the fender stool warming his thin knees and eating honey sandwiches between the two people whom he adored. Phyl wondered if he would blurt out the news to his father at breakfast next morning, and the same thought troubled Martin as he travelled by a variety of trams and buses back to the small hell which awaited him at home. His sister, Ruth, was sourly jealous of any excursion which he under-

took without her, and would welcome him home with spiteful hints at good times and smart friends ; his mother lived in terror that he would meet and fall in love with some girl who would marry him and persuade him to neglect the promise she constantly extracted from him—to keep Elsie with him after she was gone—and sooner or later she obliged him to account for every moment that he spent away from school or home. Elsie herself was abnormally inquisitive, and, on the score of her ill-health, must be satisfied. However, there would be time to think of that when he had shut the front door of one-hundred-and-forty-six Alexandra Road behind him, and was taking off his Burberry in the passage that smelt of gas and cats, and listening for his mother's voice to call from the sitting-room : " How late you are, Martin ! We've been wondering where on earth you could be." What worried him at the moment was the thought of Phyl left alone to face the fury he had seen at her shoulder in the Eastbourne dining-room. Michael's a snip to give the show away, he thought, even if Phyl tells him not to, which I doubt if she'll do ; and he could see Michael waking from a dream half-way through breakfast and piping out, " Oh, Daddy ! Guess who came to see us yesterday ! " I oughtn't to have let her in for it, he thought ; next time, sordid or not, I must talk to her about him and see exactly where we stand.

He had arranged to see Phyl again on an afternoon on the following week, when he intended to

cut the second half of a school football-match. But before the day came he had a letter from her to tell him that she was in bed with a cold, and to postpone his visit till a week later. Her letter arrived by the last post. Martin couldn't send her flowers or books as he would have given worlds to do, but he sat down at once and wrote an answer, and hurried to the pillar-box, catching the last post out. Thus his answer reached " Elsfield " at eight o'clock next morning.

Phyl was having breakfast in bed. She was not expecting an answer from Martin till five o'clock at the very earliest, or she might possibly have called to Michael to watch for the postman and bring her letters upstairs. Although Julian slept in his dressing-room, he had been awakened early by Phyl's sneezing, and he came down to breakfast more punctually than was his wont. As he came downstairs with the newspaper in his hand, thinking with pleasure that he could smell kedgeree, he heard the letter-box flap, and, through the frosted glass of the vestibule door, he saw the letters tumble on the mat. He opened the door, bent down with his little middle-aged grunt, and picked them up. There were a couple of circulars for himself, a postcard for the cook, and a letter for Phyl, addressed in what was known to an earlier generation as an " Oxford hand." Julian had only to glance at it to recognise Martin's writing ; and a sound that was more a groan than an exclamation burst from his mouth.

Michael had shown more discretion than Phyl or Martin had hoped for, chiefly because, at the beginning of breakfast on the morning after Martin's visit, Julian had chanced to correct him, and he had preserved a sulky silence during the rest of the meal. The passing days, sane, working days—get up, have breakfast, go to the office, read your post, dictate your answers, go out to lunch, come in again, interview an ass of an author, discuss some little matter with Sir Curtis, sign your letters, travel home, eat your dinner, read your newspaper, go to bed—such days were piling up like snow, covering and obliterating the summer's insane events. Julian's mind was a healthy one; that is to say, he did not like to think about unpleasant or morbid subjects; when he was not concentrating on his work he thought about the test match, why Oxford cannot win anything, and what possesses the selectors of players for the Davis Cup. He had not thought of Martin for almost a month, and the last time in his lofty "whipper-snapper" strain. The shock that he suffered now was so great that he was obliged to lean against the wall for support. His breath came in quick, short gasps. I can't stand it, I can't stand it, groaned his mind, and the wave of anguish curled and broke, sweeping away the structure that birth and environment and education had built on sand. He closed the vestibule door softly, and carried the letters into the small, tiled cloakroom where his hats and overcoats hung. He put the circulars and the cook's post-

card down on the side of the wash-basin, and turned Martin's letter over. It was not very firmly stuck down, too firmly, however, to allow him to raise the flap with his finger-nail. But he hadn't been twenty odd years with Curtis, Fayre & Haydon without observing the useful office trick of opening letters which have been prematurely stuck down, by inserting a round pencil at the base of the flap and rolling it cautiously downwards. An Eversharp wouldn't do, but he had a pencil in his diary, and he drew it out and thrust it through the flap. It acted perfectly. The thick paper showed no signs of tearing, the flap lifted neatly. He pulled out the letter.

"*My dear,*" Martin had written, rather affectedly, leaving wide margins, using semi-colons and colons where Julian would have used commas or dashes. "*I'm most terribly sorry to hear of your poor cold; not only because I shan't see you tomorrow, but because I hate you to have it. Do take care of yourself; and don't get up and go out to choose cauliflowers in this appalling weather. I'm cursing hideously because I can't come, as you suggest, next Wednesday. I've got to take a particularly uninspiring game that afternoon. But would the following Wednesday do? It's an age till then; and I shall hate it. In the joy of seeing you last week I'm afraid I was hopelessly inconsiderate and foolish; I shall come prepared for a practical talk next week, if you will have me.*

Have you got The Testament of Beauty? *and did you get the first edition? and do you like it?*

and may I borrow it? I forgot to ask last week.
Take care of yourself. In haste:
Always yours,
Martin.

To a dispassionate reader, these temperate phrases might have told their own true tale of a rather gallant attempt to turn love into friendship by two people who had learned that tragic lesson —to value the second best. But Julian only gathered that Phyl had already entertained Martin at "Elsfield," that it was his joy to see her, that next week he was coming again, "prepared for a practical talk." Rage and pain possessed him, and his hands shook as he turned one of the taps in the wash-basin, dabbled his finger tips under it, wetted the flap of the envelope and stuck it down. He put all the letters together, Phyl's undermost, and threw them down on the mat. Then he glanced through the frosted glass, and, seeing that the hall was empty, he opened the door and went across the hall to the dining-room. Michael was sitting at the table, staring at his porridge. "Need I eat the lumps?" he said, as Julian came in. Julian made no answer, so, conscience appeased, Michael rose and placed his scarcely touched porridge plate on the side table. "Can I take some kedgeree?" he asked.

"No," said Julian. "Go and see if the post has been; and if there are any letters for Mummy, take them upstairs."

Michael clattered out, and in a second Julian

heard him pound upstairs. That's good, he thought; that's very well organised; they don't know who they've got to reckon with in me. All through his married life he had realised, but never acknowledged, that his wife's intellect excelled his own, and, in a queer way, that had made him overrule her more. She despises me because I can't chatter about literature like that whipper-snapper, he thought; but she'll find out which is the better man in the end. He hadn't a plan, but he'd a week in front of him for planning; he could afford to sit here staring at his plate and nursing his pain. "Aren't you going to have any kedgeree?" said hungry Michael, back again. "Who's Miss Henty? Is it Ethel or Rose?" and he thrust under his father's nose a view of Walsall Municipal Gardens from the south-east. "Take it into the kitchen," said Julian. "What on earth does it matter who it's for?" Michael left the room, shrieking at the top of his voice, "Rose! Ethel! Ethel! Rose!" Julian went to the sideboard and served the kedgeree.

Before the morning was gone he had decided what to do. Next Wednesday he would go home early with a couple of theatre tickets as an excuse, and he would go round to the garden side of the house, where the long windows of the drawing-room opened on the tennis lawn; when the evenings had been lighter, he had always come in that way. He'd wait there and listen; there was a sort of ventilator in the window and Phyl had it open these muggy days. It would depend on what he

heard whether he could burst into the room with evidence to counter what they could collect at Broadway, and order Martin from the house, or whether he must enter suavely with his theatre tickets, and assume an affability which would contribute towards their eventual undoing. Apparently, Phyl had, at present, no thought of divorcing him, but she wasn't the sweet, forgiving type of woman by any means, and only God knew what she would do if he forced her hand. He must lie low until he'd got enough of a case against her to put divorce out of the question, and then, by God, they should see what manner of man he was. Throughout the week his fancy toyed with scenes in which he saw a quiet, strong, masterly man deal firmly with a philandering whipper-snapper under the eyes of a woman now placed eternally in the wrong. Scores of times in imagination he saw Martin pick up his shabby hat and slink out into the rain, while he himself closed the substantial front door of "Elsfield," and returned to the drawing-room. There was a picture by one of the few contemporary artists whose work he found tolerable, which came into his mind when his thoughts went further, a picture called *The Fallen Idol*, and painted by the Honourable John Collier.

Phyl stayed in bed for three days, reading Meredith. She was a sorry sight with a red nose, a sore upper lip and streaming eyes. Julian hated illness, hated to enter a stuffy room, to see disordered bedclothes, to hear anyone sniff or talk

thickly or use a soiled handkerchief. Even at "Lochaber," when they were without servants, he had never offered to fill her hot-water bottle, or make her a hot drink, or rub her chest; and she, feeling too tired or too ill to do these things for herself, would leave them undone, and lie in bed, too cold to sleep, feeling miserable and neglected, brooding over her grievance, praying for a serious illness which she childishly believed would awaken him to his shortcomings. But now, although he merely stood in her doorway in the mornings and sent Michael up in the evenings to ask how she was, she felt not the slightest resentment. Martin hated her to have a cold, didn't want her to get up and go out and choose cauliflowers, urged her to take care of herself. She smiled at Julian in the mornings, made light of her indisposition, and in the evenings she sent him bright, insincere messages; and she lay very comfortably in the expensive, unpretentious bed which she had bought for her room at "Elsfield," reading the *Diversion on a Penny Whistle*, thinking, how true! how beautiful! where for many years she had thought, how idealised! how saccharine!

It was without a qualm of nervousness that on Wednesday afternoon, about half-past-three o'clock, Julian prepared to leave his office. "The rest of the letters can wait till the morning, Miss Bennett," he told his secretary. "If the cable from America about Irwin's *Future of War* arrives, let Sir Curtis see it before he goes. And

make sure that Mr. Hallett gets Professor Stanley's revises off to Cambridge to-night. That's all, I think." He went into the principal's cloakroom and got his hat and coat and hurried out into the square. It was a warm, showery day ; between the showers the sun came out and shone with a spring-like radiance from a sky of tender blue. Birds were piping from the square garden. Young people with their heads together dawdled along the streets. But the weather did not affect Julian. He walked as briskly as though frost were in the air. He knew himself—an enviable position. He was a strong man, almost, he thought, a ruthless man, for, once his mind was made up, he went straight for his objective ; he was not to be turned aside by last-minute fears or hesitations, or the remorse or pity which might pluck at more womanish hearts. He was also a brave man—he had proved that in the War ; not, he admitted, a Cyril Asquith or a Julian Grenfell, but the sort of man who did not get rattled either into cowardice or the extreme courage of the highly strung ; a " useful officer," he had been styled by his superiors. He was, he found, actually looking forward to the clash of wills ; as he walked, his hands were clenched and he squared his shoulders. His only fear was that the time might not be ripe.

As he drew nearer to his home, twilight fell. Lamps shone out, revealing smug interiors, teacups tinkled, children were running home from school. He slackened his pace ; it would not do

to arrive before the garden was dark and the curtains drawn. However, up among the bigger houses on the hill it seemed darker; trees and shrubberies and tall oak fences absorbed the fading light. He came cautiously to his own gate. The drawing-room ran the breadth of the house and had windows looking north, to the road, as well as the long south windows which opened on the garden. The curtains were drawn. He swung the gate, he thought quite noiselessly, but he could hear Pilgrim bark. He stepped off the gravel. The borders were edged with a handsome grass verge, and he was able to walk very quietly round the house. He hated this job of eavesdropping. It offended his earliest and most deeply-learned principles; it wasn't gentlemanly; it wasn't cricket; the dirtiest little schoolboy knew that it was a mean, despicable thing to do. But he was strong enough to disregard his own feelings, to crucify himself, to do evil that good might come of it; there was real heroism, he thought, in such selfless, unflinching strength. On the soggy grass he walked silently to the window.

Phyl's handwoven curtains were delightful to look at; their dull blue colour and rough surface made a calm, quiet background to the life and movement of the room. But technically, as curtains, they were less successful. They did not hang so well as velvet or brocade, and needed to be carefully drawn. To-night they had fallen apart, and Rose, the house-parlourmaid, had

gone back to them before she had left the room, and had twitched them sharply together. The lower half overlapped now, but at the top they were all the worse for it, and Julian saw with satisfaction that he had only to crane his neck to look straight into the room.

The interior that he saw was charming. Only one lamp was lit, the standard lamp with the square shade which Phyl had constructed from four old prints of Oxford, bought for a few shillings in the King's Road. This threw a circle of light over the tea table, but the rest of the room was in shadow; here and there the flickering firelight picked out the golden lettering on the books. In the circle of light sat Martin with his elbows on the arms of his chair, his fingers loosely clasped, and his long legs stretched out towards the hearth. He did not look the part of a guilty lover. His face was serious and restrained. Phyl was sitting on the other side of the tea table, on the sofa, with her back to Julian. He noticed that she was wearing a red frock which was particularly becoming to her.

Martin spoke after what must have been a long pause.

"I hope you didn't mind my talking about it," he said, looking across the table at Phyl.

"Of course I didn't." Julian could not hear her as well as he had heard Martin, but he did not miss a curiously fatigued note in her voice. "I think it was very brave of you to take the plunge.

I funked it. It made everything seem so cheap and awful."

"Well, it was no use trying to idealise the situation," said Martin, frowning at the fire.

"No, it wasn't," she agreed. "After all, this is life complete with Monday morning and bacon and bills. And it's no use playing football as if you were in heaven and it was that casting-down-your-golden-crown game."

He appeared to understand her. He looked at her and smiled affectionately.

"Truth," he said, "is a nasty-looking object. I don't wonder that little Tommy Green, or whoever it was, pushed him down a well. However, he's better than that simpering ass, Hope."

"If you mean the hope of heaven or the hope that things aren't what you think they are, I agree with you. But there are small, humble hopes that are all right, hoping that the bath water's hot or that this finds you as it leaves me."

"Well, they have to be terribly humble, then," said Martin.

"I don't think ours is so very humble," said Phyl slowly. "To be able to be friends and to see each other sometimes—I think that's hoping for rather a lot. Anyhow, it lights life up, and even if the light's only lamplight and not sunshine, it's better than the cold dark."

"I know," said Martin. "Sorry, Phyl. That was positively my last grumble."

Phyl made no answer. Julian took the opportunity to relax his muscles. After a full minute's silence he heard a movement. Looking into the room again, he saw Martin rise as though to prove something.

" Can I look at your books, Phyl ? "

" Of course. They're quite exciting. I've been buying some. Have you read *The Dark Journey ?* "

Martin went over to the book-case. " You've got *Avarice House,* too," he said. " And here's Dreisler's new book, Phyl. You *are* a lucky dog ! And *Near and Far.* What more does the woman want ? Oh, *that* man ! I hate him, the self-conscious ass."

" Who ? "

Julian turned away from the window. A cold, nauseating disillusionment gripped him, body and soul. According to his knowledge of human nature, he had come to watch a love scene, and instead of guilty or potentially guilty lovers, he had found two people spiritually exhausted but victorious in a battle he had not fought nor expected them—youngish people in the year nineteen-hundred-and-twenty-nine—to fight. His guns were spiked. He could do nothing. This fellow would continue to come to his house and have tea and air his clap-trap philosophies and literary enthusiasms. And Phyl would give him what she had never given her husband—her thoughts ; he would possess her mind. And there was nothing to forbid such an association, not even in the marriage

service; to the end she would be able to congratulate herself that she had kept her marriage vows. I'm strong, thought Julian, strong as a rock, and they're nothing but a couple of neurotic intellectuals; but, whatever I do, or life does—give them summer, or night or solitude—that won't shake them; if I live to be a hundred. I shan't catch them; they're safe now. I'm helpless, I'm helpless, he thought, and the fury of impotent strength shook him so that he trembled. He looked through the curtains again. Martin, tall, calm and pleasant, was leaning against the book-case, turning over the pages of a thin volume, saying, "Isn't this lovely? Listen!" and then reading aloud. He didn't pause nor hesitate, though the door opened, and Rose came in with a teapot and a plate of hot buttered toast on a tray.

"Come and have some tea, Martin," said Phyl.

And Julian saw Martin close the book and replace it in the shelf, and walk across to the table, and stand there while Phyl poured out his tea. Then he watched no longer. His mood had changed. What was finest in his character, that stout, British refusal to accept defeat, bred in his bone, fostered by education, the same stiff heart's core that had met despair over and over again in Flanders, repelled it now. Helpless? he thought. What an idea! I'm not helpless. I'm not to be beaten by that smirking young swine. He turned away from the window, a torrent of

imprecations sweeping his mind. God! I"l teach him! He doesn't know he's up against a superman. Yes! That was the truth at last. A superman! so strong, so far above ordinary frailty that he could see the world as God saw it, a year like a moment, men like insects, so that he had been able to take a life and never suffer a pnag of remorse for it, nor think any more of it than if he had crushed a fly. Was such a man to be defied, frustrated by a shabby schoolmaster with a womanish taste for modern poetry and afternoon tea? He could have laughed aloud. Martin and Phyl in their submissive lives hadn't an idea what strength was; they called themselves agnostics, and yet were afraid to break a commandment imposed by a Jew centuries even before Christ. But I'm not afraid of anything in heaven or earth, thought Julian, and that's where my power lies; and, if they knew it, they'd be too scared ever to see each other again. He wished that he could go into the room and tell them straight out that he was a man who had taken the gift of life from another as easily as though he were God, and that, not out in the wilds, out of sight of civilisation, but on a Sunday evening, in one of London's most desirable suburbs, under the nose of relatives, servants and a trained medical man. A passion of vanity seized him. What a brain to plan! he thought admiringly, what steel nerves to act! Ordinary brains haven't the remotest chance against mine. I could kill that fellow, he thought, and never suffer for it;

I'm too strong ever to be sorry for it, and too clever to be found out. I'll rid the place of him as though he were vermin, he thought. He'll die just as father died, and a simpleton of a doctor will sit at a table and write down 'heart-failure,' or if it isn't heart-failure it'll be ptomaine poisoning, and even if it's arsenic, I've bought none; I've never had any weed-killer; who can point at me? He did not hesitate. No sooner was the thought in his mind than he was walking out of the garden and up the road. His heart was full of pride. He thinks I'm only Prebble, a dull, middle-aged, office wallah, not to be compared with his dashing self, getting old while he's young, fat while his body's like a Greek athlete's, bald while he's got a head of red hair with a wave in it—well, he won't think that when he's rotting just because I chose that he should. Julian turned into the road which runs east and west along the summit of the hill, and then to his left, down Ridgemount Hill and past The Elms. He walked extraordinarily quickly for a man of his build, throwing his feet out like a man in a walking race and swinging his arms. Joy as well as pride possessed him, an elation, a feeling that he shared the secret and the power of God. In a few moments he came to the long oak fence of Sir Alan Derwent's property. He followed it down the hill as far as the lane where the garden ended. Here he turned. There was a gate in the lane. Coke and slack for the Derwents' greenhouses and manure for the kitchen garden were brought

in this way. Julian opened the gate and slipped into the garden.

He did not fear discovery, though it was not five o'clock yet, and men might still be at work, putting tools away or stoking greenhouse fires. The thought that any human agency could divert him from his purpose did not enter his mind. He turned to the left, and found a path which wound upwards through the shrubbery not far from the fence. It must have been little used, for he felt moss beneath his feet and the long laurel leaves brushed his shoulders as he passed. When he was almost at the top of the hill, the path turned to the right ; if he followed it further, it would lead him out on the lawn. He stepped into the shrubbery and made his way, not without some difficulty, to the fence. Then the lamps in the road helped him and, after a few seconds' search, he saw, at the foot of a tall rhododendron bush, a gleam of white. He struck a match and recognised the tin which he had thrown over the fence almost eight months ago. I'm safe, he thought. God ! how safe ! All Scotland Yard could search for a hundred years and never find this tin. He pulled it clear of the leaves. It had lain on its side, but a little moisture had collected at the edge. He emptied that out, pulled his penknife from his pocket and began to scrape the damp surface of the stuff away. Crouching there in his thick overcoat, his movements were clumsy and he was hasty ; he dug too deeply, and the blade of his knife broke. He had to open

the smaller blade which was stiff because he seldom used it, and he wasted some time over that, for he kept his nails short, and haste made him fumble all the more. At last he had it open. He took out his handkerchief, scraped the powder into it, and folded it carefully. Then he pushed the tin back, further under the dense, smooth leaves than it had been before, and stood up, glad to stretch his cramped limbs. As he did so he heard the clock of the parish church strike five. He slipped out of the shrubbery and hurried down the path, buttoning his overcoat as he walked. When he reached the greenhouses, he heard voices and a scuffle of footsteps, and hesitated until he realised that the sounds came from the lane. He opened the gate and stepped out boldly ; a couple of larking schoolboys ran past him full tilt into the road. He followed them up the hill. He wasn't in good training ; lately he had formed a habit of thinking, I'd better take it easy, when he came to a hill. But to-night he was unconscious of the gradient, not until he stood at his own front door did he realise that he was sweating profusely. He went into the cloakroom, hung up his hat, took off his overcoat, transferring the handkerchief to the coat pocket of his grey lounge suit, washed his hands, dashed the lukewarm water over his face, glanced in the mirror above the washbasin and smoothed his hair. Then he walked across the hall and opened the door of the drawing-room.

He saw at once that Phyl and Martin had finished tea.

Martin was sitting in the chair that he had previously occupied, and Phyl was still sitting on the sofa. Neither of them was speaking, and neither looked round until Julian said, "Oh . . . good-evening, Howard." Then he watched Martin's face. Its expression was grave and sensitive, surprised perhaps, but not in the least taken aback or embarrassed. He got up and shook hands with Julian.

"How lovely and early you are," observed Phyl.

"I've got a couple of tickets for *Sorry You Have Been Troubled*," said Julian. "So I thought I'd come back early, and dress, and we'll go up and have a little dinner at the Criterion. I'm glad I got back in time to see you, Howard. Have you got a cup of tea for me, Phyl?"

"Well, it's been in some time, Julian. I'll ring the bell, and we'll have some fresh."

"All right. I daresay you and Howard can manage another cup." Julian drew up a chair and sat down beside the tea table.

"I hear that that's a very funny show," said Martin.

"I believe it is," said Julian. Sitting where he was, it would naturally fall to him to pass Martin's cup. If he sat still, his slightest movement could easily be seen by Martin, and if he rose and stood by the tea-table, the fellow had such fussy manners that, in all probability, he would rise too.

"Well, and how's life treating you, Howard?" asked Julian. Of course it was quite possible to get him up to look at something, a picture or a book . . .

"All right, thanks," said Martin. "This is really rather a peaceful term, at least when the new boys have settled down. It's next term which is the awful one—mumps and measles and the whole box of tricks."

"The summer term is the nicest," remarked Phyl.

"Oh, it is. I hear that John's enjoying himself, Mr. Prebble.

"He seems to be getting on well," said Julian.

"He would," said Martin. "I'm sure he'll make a first-class forward one day."

The parlourmaid brought in another teapot and a cup and saucer, and set them down on the table. Julian liked strong tea, and Phyl stirred it before she poured it out.

"Will that be strong enough, Julian?"

"That'll do. Isn't anyone else going to keep me company?"

"I'm finished, I'm afraid," said Phyl. "Especially if we're going to have an early dinner."

"Howard, you can manage another cup," said Julian.

"No, thanks."

"Oh, nonsense. Pass up your cup."

"No, honestly not," said Martin. "Thanks

very much, but I've done myself all too well already."

"I can't sit here eating by myself," said Julian.

"Well, I'll have another cup," said Phyl.

"How long does it take you from here to the West End in the car?" said Martin politely to Julian.

Julian didn't answer for a moment; then he gave a start and said, "About half-an-hour."

Phyl said, "It takes much longer by Underground, because we're at least ten minutes from the bus stop. We really couldn't have lived here without a car."

"How is the car?" asked Martin.

"Running very well indeed," said Julian, setting down his cup. "I've nothing to complain of, nothing at all. That reminds me, I must fill up as we pass the garage to-night, Phyl. Yesterday I had to switch over to the reserve."

"Well, I ought to be off, I suppose," said Martin, getting out of his chair. "You've got to dress, haven't you? Give my love to John when you write, Phyl, won't you? And tell Michael I was sorry not to see him."

"All right," said Phyl. "I'll remember. I know Michael will be sorry too. Perhaps you'll come over to lunch one Sunday and see him, and the garden. Just ring up and say you're coming. We're always in on Sundays. Julian's levelling the tennis lawn."

Julian had risen too.

" Come along and have a whisky-and-soda on your way out, Howard," he said, ushering Martin across the room towards the door.

" Oh, no, thanks, really not," said Martin.

" You're not going to refuse the first time in our new house, are you ? " said Julian.

Martin hesitated. An hour, half-an-hour later on in the evening, he would be quite ready for a drink, but he had just had tea ; moreover, he didn't want to go and stand in the dining-room and talk and drink with a man he particularly disliked. But the fellow seems keen on it, he thought ; he's pressing me ; he seems to regard it as a sort of house-warming effect ; he'll probably be offended if I refuse. " Well, if you put it like that . . . " he said, forcing a smile, and he followed Julian into the dining-room.

" How do you like this room ? " said Julian, at the sideboard.

Martin looked round him.

" It's charming, isn't it ? " he said. " You've got such nice big windows. And it faces east, doesn't it ? I suppose you get the morning sun ? "

Julian didn't say anything, so, with an effort, Martin went on. " I see you've chosen paint instead of a wall-paper." Julian turned round holding out a tall tumbler and saying, " Is that how you like it ? "

" That's splendid," said Martin. " Thank you."

Julian lifted his own tumbler, and said, " Cheerio."

Martin said, " Cheerio."

Both men drank.

" Yes, Phyl has taste," said Julian, when he had taken his glass from his lips. " This is quite a common-place house, really : square rooms, sash windows and so on. But she's given it quite a character, hasn't she ? "

Martin said, " Um."

Julian thought : so you won't discuss her with me, won't you ? And though he was killing Martin, though his power was in every gulp of the long, golden drink, he must use his strength, he must do more. " You and she have many tastes in common, haven't you ? "

Martin thought : so this is what I was brought in here for. He had been half-sitting, half-leaning against the table with his glass in his hand. Now he put down his glass, and stood up, and met Julian's eyes.

" Yes, we have."

But Julian only said, " Books are a great bond." He had seen Martin's glass go down. " You read a great deal, I suppose ? " he continued pleasantly.

Martin took up his glass. " Not as much as I should like to," he said. " I haven't really much time." He waited for a moment because he didn't want to look as if he were running away, but Julian said nothing, so he finished his drink and said, " I really must be going."

" Well, I hope you will come and see us again," said Julian, setting down his own glass and walking towards the door.

" Thank you," said Martin.

Julian helped him into his Burberry, and went out to the gate with him, and shook hands, and said " Good-night." When he got back into the house, Phyl was in the hall.

" I've un-ordered dinner, Julian," she said. " Will you have the bath first, or shall I ? "

Julian was humming a tune.

" Just as you like, my dear," he said. " There's no terrible rush as long as we leave the house by half-past-six. I've seen young Howard off. I gave him a drink and sent him on his way rejoicing."

" Good," said Phyl.

She went upstairs, bathed and dressed. While she was dressing, Michael came in, and from her bedroom she could hear Julian romping with him down in the hall.

" You earwig-faced octopus, you can't catch me ! " chanted Michael, and Julian boomed, " Can't I ? " Then there was a rush and a scuffle and peals of laughter intermingled with shrieks. Phyl smiled at her pretty reflection in the mirror. She thought, he can't mean to make a fuss about Martin, he's much too pleased with life. As far as that went, she was right. Julian was pleased with life, so pleased that he was not romping just to amuse Michael, he was laughing and shouting in the joy of his own heart.

He had secured for himself for ever what he had come so near to losing, his home and his sons and his wife—life itself to the husband and father of thirteen years. He went upstairs to dress, and sang in his bath ; at dinner he was hungry and hearty ; he laughed himself hoarse at the theatre, and, when it was over, he insisted on taking Phyl along to the Trocadero for the cabaret. It was getting on for two o'clock when they reached home. At the same time, in his slip of a bedroom in north London, Martin Howard was lying in intense bodily discomfort, wondering what on earth he had eaten at supper to make him feel so sick. Presently he sat up in bed and switched on the light. Then he realised that he was going to be sick. He got out of bed, put his dressing-gown over his shoulders, and tip-toed out into the passage, hoping not to wake his mother and his sisters and create a fuss. But in the passage he felt so much worse that he was obliged to hurry ; he flung open the bathroom door and was violently sick into the wash-basin. When the first spasm had passed, and he was sitting on the edge of the bath shivering and wiping the sweat from his forehead, Ruth appeared in the doorway, an unattractive figure in a red, quilted dressing-gown, with her long hair sweeping over her shoulders.

" What's the matter, Martin ? "

" I'm being sick," said Martin, and knowing that he was about to vomit again, he added in a desperate voice, " For God's sake, go away."

Ruth tossed her head and said, " Oh, very well, If I'm not wanted, I'll go." She went away, but he heard a whisper in the passage, and his mother's haggard face peered at him. " I'm sure I don't know what you've had to upset you," she said in an aggrieved voice. " Those little chops we had at supper couldn't have had anything wrong with them. They smelled all right. And the tartlets were only made this morning. Besides, no one else has complained. You must have had something at the school. That's right, dear ; bring it up, and you'll feel better."

Martin gasped out, " Go to bed, Mother ; I'm all right."

But Mrs. Howard placed her thin arm round his shoulders and stayed with him, reiterating, " That's right, dear," as though he were a child. When he stopped vomiting, she looked at him hopefully, and said, " How do you feel ? "

" Oh, I feel bloody," said Martin with his forehead on the edge of the basin, too ill now even to pretend.

CHAPTER XIII

ONE-HUNDRED-AND-FORTY-SIX ALEXANDRA ROAD

MARION HOWARD loved nothing in the world so much as she loved her daughter Elsie, but that was a morbid, almost a frenzied love, springing from a dark fount of an inexhaustible remorse : her greatest sane love was for her son. She was a selfish woman, and had made his hard life more difficult by a petty domestic tyranny which had robbed him of many small pleasures ; but his death caused her a more complex emotion than sorrow, the same fury of resentment which turned pious women into atheists during the War. Just as such women revenged themselves by denying their God, she, too disillusioned to look to heaven, sought a whipping boy. She was prepared to upbraid the doctor, a keen, youngish man, new to the district, but he came downstairs from Martin's bedroom to the drawing-room where the three women were sitting, and took the wind out of her sails with his first words. He said seriously, " Mrs. Howard, I'm afraid I'm not yet satisfied as to the cause of death,"

and looked at her out of a pair of severe grey eyes. " You told me that you thought he'd had something to upset him. Now what could that be ? "

" Nothing in *this* house," said Mrs. Howard aggressively. " We had some little chops for supper ; my daughter bought them in the morning from the butcher we always deal with, and I put them in the oven myself. And we had baked potatoes with them. And then little tarts. My daughter made them in the morning too."

" What was inside them ? "

" Apricot jam. There was nothing wrong with them. As you see, no one else was upset."

" I don't know that that follows. What did he drink ? "

" Water."

" Hmm. And that was his last meal ? "

" Yes. He didn't have anything after I'd gone to bed, did he, Ruth ? "

Ruth was sitting over the gas fire, crying. She had not loved her brother very deeply, nor felt in the least grateful to him for keeping together this depressing home. Indeed, she had despised him for earning so small a salary, and sometimes she had hated him for failing in the fraternal duty of bringing home eligible men. But she realised that without him she would be worse off than ever, hopelessly off ; and the copious tears of self-pity ran down her face. Called upon to address the doctor,

she turned her head and realised that she was in the presence of a youngish and, she believed, unmarried man. She straightened her body from its hopeless attitude and dried her swollen eyes.

" He didn't have anything else, Doctor," she said. " Sometimes he would have a biscuit, last thing, or an apple, if there happened to be one on the sideboard. But last night he went to bed rather early. He seemed quiet."

" Well, what about his other meals ? He had breakfast here, I suppose ? And lunch ? "

" He had lunch at the school," said Mrs. Howard. " They're none too particular there. Martin often complained about it, didn't he, Ruth ? "

" He never said it was bad, Mother. Only dull."

" Well, they've got a man cook there, and I daresay he's none too clean. I thought Martin had had tea there, and so, of course, I thought at once of the urn. But last night, before he got so bad, I asked him what he'd had, and he told me he'd left the football early and gone to see Mrs. Prebble. He had tea there."

" Who's Mrs. Prebble ? "

" He was tutor to her boys in the summer holidays."

" Her husband's a publisher," Ruth volunteered. " A partner in Curtis, Fayre & Haydon."

" Well," said the doctor, " there doesn't seem to be much to go on there. Of course, November

is a bad time for keeping food, but an ordinary little upset from meat that wasn't as fresh as it should be, or something like that, wouldn't prove fatal to a healthy young man like your son. I'm sorry, but I'm afraid a post-mortem examination will be necessary before I can sign the certificate."

"Oh dear, oh dear, how dreadful!" murmured Ruth.

"Don't be a fool, Ruth," said her mother. "I shall be only too glad to find out who's to blame. If it's the cook at the school . . . . "

"We don't know yet that it is food poisoning," said the doctor sharply. "That was only your suggestion. We may find internal trouble of quite a different kind. I shall have to go along to the surgery now, but I'll call back in about half-an-hour, if you'll leave everything as it is, please."

He went out of the room. Ruth followed him into the passage, helped him on with his overcoat, and opened the front door.

"Your brother hasn't complained of any pain lately, I suppose?" he asked, standing on the door-step.

"No, Doctor," said Ruth. "Except for colds in the head sometimes, his health was excellent. I don't know what we shall do without him," she added, drooping pathetically.

"Very sad," said the doctor. "Your mother's a widow, isn't she?"

Ruth nodded.

" Well, I'll be back soon," he said, and walked briskly across the pavement to his car, glad to be out of that dreary house and away from those three hopeless, helpless women.

Ruth shut the door behind him. She could hear voices in the drawing-room. Now that the stranger had gone, Elsie had begun to ask questions ; her voice was hoarse from weeping. Beneath a show of patience, Ruth hated her afflicted sister, and Elsie knew it, and all her love was for Martin, the one cheerful, normal association of her clouded life. Ruth couldn't bear to go into the drawing-room and listen to Elsie's questions about " darling Martin." She went upstairs, passing Martin's door with a shudder ; the thought of a post-mortem examination disgusted her, and she felt vaguely that Martin was to blame for it ; in life he had disgusted her on rare occasions when he had lost his temper and said " hell " and " bloody " ; and once, at a theatre, when he had expressed a mild appreciation of the figure of a chorus girl. She went into her room, poured some cold water into a basin, and began to bathe her eyes.

As far as Mrs. Howard and her daughters knew that night, the post-mortem examination revealed nothing. The doctor muttered to the older woman —he had summed her up as hard as nails—that he was taking certain organs to the laboratory,

and he filled in some particulars on the death certificate and said that no doubt he'd be able to finish it off in the morning. Mrs. Howard, haggard and tearless, took up her tirade against the school, and he felt bound to say, " You know, I've found nothing to indicate food poisoning." But, so he told his wife afterwards, the woman had to get her claws into someone. She said, " Strong men like Martin don't die for nothing, Doctor," and looked at him in a queer, threatening way. Her daughters had got themselves into mourning, the out-of-date, camphor-scented garments which such women can always produce, and they stood on either side of her, black as crows in the economical light of their crowded drawing-room, all three looking at him, ready, he supposed, to go round the district gossiping, saying that Doctor Blunt had never found out what their precious brother died of. " I am quite aware of that," he said stiffly. " In fact, I believe I made the same remark myself. Of course I shall let you know what conclusion I reach as early as possible to-morrow morning." Thinking of their to-morrow, he relented a little. " In the meantime, can I do anything . . . ? "

She asked him to call at the undertaker's on the way home, and this he promised to do. She saw him out herself, and Ruth went listlessly into the kitchen and heated some Oxo and milk and got together an unappetising

meal. The younger women were too exhausted for conversation, but their mother seemed indefatigable ; charged with unnatural vitality, she sat at the head of the table, talking and talking until Ruth could have screamed aloud.

" Mother will break down if she goes on like that," said Elsie, as she and Ruth stood in the scullery, washing up the few plates and dishes they had used. " It's no use trying to fasten the blame on someone, now darling Martin's dead." She began to cry again.

Ruth said, " It's no use crying, either. The kettle's boiling. Fill your hot-water bottle and go to bed."

Elsie obeyed like a child ; and when the kettle had boiled again, and she had filled up her own hot-water bottle, Ruth followed her.

Elsie cried herself to sleep, but Ruth stayed awake, separated only by a few inches of lathe and plaster from the small, silent room where her brother's body lay, trying to remember what he had told her about his life insurance policy, racking her tired brain until she, too, slept.

Doctor Blunt was enjoying a rubber of bridge—nothing like it for taking one's mind off one's work ; and Albert Skinner, a manager to Messrs. Gates and Firkin, funeral furnishers, was getting into bed by his wife with the remark that business was brisker than it had been all autumn, and that he'd got to

be down at Alexandra Road first thing in the morning.

Then only Martin's mother remembered him.

CHAPTER XIV

HOPES MUST BE HUMBLE

PHYL learned of Martin's death after Julian had started for the office, when she happened to glance down the column of Births, Deaths and Marriages in the *Times*. So unbelievable were the formal words that she laid the paper down and went into the kitchen and ordered luncheon and dinner and Saturday's breakfast, and inspected a stiff tap on the gas stove, before she realised, not so clearly that he was dead as that she would never see him nor speak to him nor hear him speak again. At first she did not even feel sorry ; she felt cold and ill. She went into the drawing-room and crouched down beside the fire. " Martin," she said aloud. " What happened ? Where are you ? " They'd agreed that bodies didn't matter, and for a moment she hoped insanely that they wouldn't matter now. The answer to her hope was a wall of silence, and that sense of diffusion and difficulty which she had often felt in returning to the consideration of practical things after some infinite

journey of the mind. She took up the newspaper.

" *On December 5th, very suddenly . . .* "

She thought, on Wednesday he hadn't even a cold ; and she shut her eyes on the stark winter daylight of the empty room, saw kinder firelight, the circle of light round the tea-table, Martin sitting in the armchair, disillusioned but submissive in spirit, healthy in body from his red head to his shabby, well-cleaned shoes. He hadn't been ill, and you could rule out suicide ; he's defended it often enough, but he was almost absurdly tolerant, and he defended all sorts of actions that he would never do himself. " *On December 5th, very suddenly, at* 146 *Alexandra Road, N., Martin Henry, only son of the late Professor Edward Howard and Mrs. Howard, aged* 33." There wasn't any hope of a mistake. His age was right, and " Martin Henry." She'd called him Henry often, sitting in the gimcrack drawing-room at Eastbourne, arguing over their accounts. Oh, Martin, Martin, come back ! Come back and argue, and laugh, and rave over a line of poetry or a sunset, and come out of the sea with your hair on end and the water drying on your brown body, or down to supper looking young and polite in your shiny dinner jacket, or stand at the bookcase, there, pulling out books and turning the pages and saying, ' Listen ; isn't this lovely, Phyl ? ' You were right. Hopes have to be very

humble ones. It was far too much to hope that we should see each other sometimes and be friends. Hot bath water's as much as one can hope for in this deaf and blind and idiotic state called life. Philosophy didn't help. Perhaps she wasn't young enough. She thought: had he suffered? and, did he know that he was dying? and, had he spoken of her? Such things. It was unbearable to know no more than this curt notice told her, and, without hesitation, she resolved to go at once to his home. Normally, a visit of condolence would have been torture to her; her shyness made her a poor sympathiser; but now she did not even stop to think if it would be tactful or becoming; she went to the telephone and called a taxi: Julian dealt generously with her where money was concerned. Half-an-hour's drive brought her to the long, unlovely street where Martin had lived, and to the house with the blinds drawn. Mrs. Howard's charwoman opened the door.

"Could I speak to Mrs. Howard for a moment?"

The woman said, "I'll see," and moved away. With a stab of anguish, Phyl recognised Martin's Burberry hanging upon a row of pegs behind the door. She felt suddenly that she couldn't pretend not to love him any longer, that she must bury her face in it and cry. Then a door opened and a tall, grey-haired woman stood beside her. Phyl swallowed back her tears.

"I hope you don't mind my coming," she

said with the diffidence which always exasperated Julian. "I'm Mrs. Prebble." She added incoherently, "I expect you know who I mean."

"Won't you come in?"

"Thank you," said Phyl. She followed Mrs. Howard into the drawing-room, seizing the opportunity to wipe her eyes on the back of her fur gloves.

The drawing-room was at the front of the house, and the blinds were down. Mrs. Howard went across to the window and raised them a little.

"My son was with you at Eastbourne this summer," she said, as she did so.

"Yes," said Phyl. "And he came to see us on Wednesday. That's why I was so surprised and . . . and upset to see about him in the *Times* this morning. He seemed so well then . . . "

"He was perfectly well," said Mrs. Howard, staring before her. "He wasn't taken ill till very early next morning. He was terribly sick then, but later on he seemed better. We thought he'd eaten something that disagreed with him. We didn't call the doctor in till the afternoon, and he passed away during the evening."

"What was it?"

"The doctor hasn't signed the certificate, Mrs. Prebble. He made a post-mortem examination, but that doesn't seem to have told him anything. He came in for a moment this morning

to say that there would have to be an inquest. It is all very terrible."

Phyl said, " Martin had tea with us. He had buttered toast and some rock buns. And China tea. And a whisky-and-soda before he left. But I think it was all all-right, because no one else was ill. I had some of the toast, and my small boy finished the rock buns when he came in."

" Martin told me that he had had tea with you. I thought he'd had it at school, and I was blaming the urn. But he said, " I didn't have it at school, Mother ; I had it with Phyl," and, of course, as I didn't know you by that name, I asked who it was."

She had, in fact, been surprised to hear her son refer to the wife of his sometime employer by an obvious abbreviation of her Christian name ; but she had concluded that Mr. Prebble, being a publisher, moved in literary circles, and these were Bohemian ways. Phyl's appearance completely reassured her ; well over thirty, quiet, nondescript ; she wasn't the sort to think of young men or to be thought of by them.

" When will the inquest be ? "

" I don't know. The contents of the stomach are to be analysed."

Phyl stood up. This house with the blinds down and the stiff, mutilated body hidden somewhere upstairs, this talk of certificates and inquests, what on earth had it to do with the Martin she had known ? He had hated death's

conventional trappings, had made jokes about wreaths and crosses, had always referred to cemeteries as " bone orchards," and mocked at people who talked about " passing away." She had a curiously vivid feeling that he was hating it now, that he was saying, " Surely, Phyl, *you're* not going to draw down blinds, and whisper, and say, " Poor Martin's gone," so vivid it was that she thought : perhaps, after all, death's not the end. She said, " I mustn't keep you any longer, Mrs. Howard. Perhaps they'll want me at the inquest, and I'll see you then. But, if they don't, and if I can ever do anything for you, you'll let me know, won't you ? Martin did such a lot for the boys."

Mrs. Howard said, " Thank you. I don't suppose you'll be worried to attend the inquest. I hope not. Doctors don't know anything, and, if they did, they'd be afraid to blame anyone. I could tell them what it was, and, in the end, after all the trouble and expense of an inquest, they'll have to own it—a dirty saucepan at the school."

Phyl said good-bye, and went away up the street, and presently found a taxi in which she drove home. She gave Michael his lunch, listening intelligently to an account of how that sneak, Thompson, had thrown Smith's book into a puddle on the Common and not owned up when Smith was given a detention by Mr. Lane. She realised that life was going to be bearable, not because she didn't love Martin, but because she wasn't

used to him, because the stupid days would come and go with nothing in them sweet enough to stir the memory of him ; she'd sleep and eat and read the newspapers, and order meals, and shop, and listen to what the boys said and to what Julian said, and go out to tea and say, " It is, isn't it ? " and go to the theatre and enjoy jokes, and only valerian and bathing and *The Great Lover* and the flicker of firelight on books would make her remember him and what it had been like to love and at the same time to understand.

Julian came home in good time that evening, but Phyl was dressing, and he did not see her until they sat down to dinner. When the maid had left the room, Phyl looked across the table and said, " Did you see about Martin Howard in the *Times* this morning ? "

Julian said, " No, but I saw it at lunch time at the Club." Since he had inherited his father's money he had been able to realise his life-long ambition to join a " decent " club, and he lunched there every day. " It gave me quite a shock," he said. " I was waiting for a fellow, and I just picked up the paper, and there it was. How did you hear ? "

" I saw it in the *Times*."

" I expect it gave you a shock too," said Julian kindly. " Which day was it that he was here ? "

" Wednesday."

" And he died yesterday ! How shocking !

I wonder what on earth it could have been ? "

The question rang true. He had spent a consequential day ; for hours he'd sat in the gentlemanly room above the square gardens pursuing his dignified profession ; he had interviewed a major-general, an archdeacon, an authoritative numismatist ; he had dictated letters to a bishop, an ex-cabinet minister, a Professor of Pure Mathematics, and a Reader in Moral Philosophy ; he had wound up by a very friendly chat with Sir Curtis Fayre. Now he was sitting down to dinner with his wife in a house for which he had not hesitated to pay five thousand pounds. It was as incredible to himself as it would have been to anyone who knew him, that, three days ago, in this same room, he had killed a man.

" There's going to be an inquest," said Phyl.

" An inquest ? " he repeated sharply. " Why ? "

" I suppose they didn't have the doctor soon enough," she said in a low voice. " Anyhow, he couldn't sign the certificate."

" How do you know ? "

" I went to see his mother."

" Well, really, of all the idiotic things . . . " He had to break off because the maid came in to remove the meat plates, but, when she had brought in the savoury, he said in the same exasperated tone, " Rose, you needn't wait. We'll ring." " Of all the idiotic things ! " he repeated when she had gone out and shut the door, thinking he's lost his hair all right : I wouldn't be her !

" Why was it idiotic ? " Phyl asked him. She hadn't made much of a meal, he'd noticed ; but her manner was funny, not what he'd expected. He had expected tears ; as a rule they came easily to her—not once nor twice had he put the rhetoric question, why in God's name had he married a snivelling wife ? But she didn't even look as though she'd been crying ; she looked pale, but self-assured ; she spoke to him as though he didn't matter ; he felt that he could say or do anything, that anyone could say or do anything, and it wouldn't matter to her at all. When he desired to make an impression, his impulse was always to raise his voice, and he began to shout at her now.

" Why ? Ask yourself. It was tactless, to begin with. People don't want strangers fussing round at such times. To go on with, supposing there *is* something funny about it, *you* don't want to be mixed up in it." A horrible thought occurred to him. " I suppose you haven't committed any other indiscretions, written him any silly letters ? "

Phyl looked at him as though he were a long way off. She said in a cold voice, " I had no occasion to write silly letters to Martin."

" Well, that's a good thing," said Julian. He meant it from the bottom of his heart. All doctors were not, apparently, of the same calibre as old Hornburn, and, if this fellow were asking for an inquest, undoubtedly he would have the stomach, or whatever it was, analysed. That meant that

arsenic would be found. But what of it! What motive could Julian Prebble have had in poisoning the young man who had so admirably tutored his sons? But, supposing it came to light that Phyl and Martin had been lovers? Julian Prebble had a motive then, and, though there was a gap in the chain—for it was inconceivable that any human agency should chance on the tin of weed-killer under one out of a hundred rhododendron bushes in one out of a hundred shrubberies—tongues would wag, the breath of suspicion might blow his way. "Don't you see that, in the circumstances, you *can't* be too careful?" he said.

"I'm afraid I don't," said Phyl. "Personally, I think that to go over there was the least I could do. As a matter of fact, Martin's mother suspects that it was food-poisoning, and I was able to tell her exactly what he'd had here."

"Did she know he'd been here?"

"Yes. He told her."

"I shall write to-night and mention it to the Coroner," said Julian.

"I don't see that there's any need to do that," said Phyl. "She'll tell him. And if they want us, they'll send for us, anyway."

Julian said nothing, but she saw that he meant to write. He had, she knew, an inherent love of pointing out facts, bringing scandals to official notice, performing his duty as a citizen; some day, no doubt, he would take an energetic part in municipal affairs. He went to his study after

dinner, and presently brought into the drawing-room a letter which he read aloud. " I think it's rather officious," said Phyl with uncaring candour, and Julian said, " I'm sorry I showed it to you," and stalked out. And Phyl hated him because she could see that he had enjoyed writing the letter, writing as a man of substance, pointing out that he was a principal of the publishing house of Curtis Fayre & Haydon, organising and arranging and patronizing the sordid, unlovely muddle that poor, dead Martin had left behind him on earth.

CHAPTER XV

RESPECTED

THE inquest on Martin was held on the Monday following his death, in a hall used vicariously for dances, charity bazaars, whist drives, and as a coroner's court. Julian went to his office as usual that morning; he had told Phyl that, if things were slack, he might possibly find time later in the day to slip down to the court and see what was going on. Actually, things were far from slack, but, as soon as he arrived, he had a taxi called, dealt quickly with one or two urgent matters, and was off. The proceedings that morning were purely formal, and, before noon, the inquest had been adjourned for the expert's report. Julian travelled back to Bloomsbury amused and flattered. Though they did not know it, the people assembled in that court were his puppets; this was his show. In reaction to his action the inquest was held, for him the pressmen scribbled, the doctor neglected his patients, the women jurors left their homes at sixes and sevens—dinner spoiled, dust on the piano, wash-day ignored—and the men their day's work undone; on his account the mother and sisters had peered into

trunks and ottomans and brought out their seedy black. He'd had some difficulty in pulling as long a face as those about him; it had made him smile to see the coroner, the doctor, the snuffy suburban solicitor who had had charge of Martin's nugatory affairs, the pressmen—talk about the power of the press!—the grey-haired mother with her rambling story, and her discontented spinster daughter, all dancing to the tune he had played and not knowing it, never knowing it in spite of their portentous enquiry. So vastly superior he felt to the common run of men, keepers, through fear or brainlessness, of the law he had broken, that he felt surprised they didn't read his superiority on his face and stare at him. During a discussion with Sir Curtis Fayre that afternoon, he began to shout as he did when he talked to Phyl, drowning the old man's voice with his own. Behind his Tennysonian—not Arthurian—chivalry, Sir Curtis was as obstinate as any other reactionary, but he spread out his white hands and made a courtly show of admitting Julian's point, feeding his triumphant mood. On his way home in the Underground, Julian opened his newspaper and presently came on a modest paragraph:

Dead Schoolmaster. Inquest Adjourned for Analyst's Report.

He looked about him. The compartment was full of men reading newspapers, average, level-headed

men ; but they hadn't an idea that the slayer of the dead schoolmaster was among them, his overcoat touching their overcoats as he clung to his strap. He glanced over one man's shoulder and saw another paper had made more of it :

Mystery of Dead Schoolmaster. Inquest Adjourned ; and further down, *Mrs. Howard, the mother of the deceased, said to an Evening Post reporter to-day* . . . He bought the *Evening Post* as he left the station. The old lady, of course, had been talking, giving an account of how her son had spent the day before his death, and Julian's name was mentioned . . . *On the way home my son called on Mrs. Prebble, the wife of the publisher, to whose sons he had acted as tutor during the summer holidays.* That was a nuisance, Julian considered. It meant that men would come up to him and say jocosely, " I see you're mixed up in the latest mystery," or even, " I see you've done in a schoolmaster." Still, he knew how to deal with them. " Yes, rather ! Arsenic in the jam ! " He'd be able to say it, and to say it in a way that would utterly and unalterably convince them ; his nerves were steel.

Phyl did not ask him if he had attended the inquest. In the course of the evening he said to her, " Have you seen about Howard in the paper ? " She nodded. " I hate your name coming into it," he said.

" Why ? " she asked, disagreeably.

" Well, people will read it, and it's sure to cause some talk."

" Good heavens ! who cares for that ? "

Her contempt for what she called " chat " was quite genuine, but Julian, who minded very much what people said about him, had always thought it an affectation.

He said sharply, " Don't be a fool. I hate those silly, superior Oxford airs."

Phyl made no retort, but closed the conversation by picking up *This Blind Rose.*

Both Phyl and Julian were summoned to the resumed inquest. In the meantime, the coroner's officer had called at " Elsfield," very apologetically, just as a matter of form. Phyl showed him everything from the tea caddy on the kitchen dresser to the whisky decanter in the sideboard cupboard. With Mrs. Howard, she thought that Martin had died from food poisoning, and, though she was too purely of an intellectual type to feel his mother's lusty desire for revenge by blaming someone, she was glad enough to assist the arm of the law, to which she owed an absent-minded person's debt of gratitude for returned umbrellas, safe crossings, and directions for finding the way. The coronor's officer took with him the whisky decanter, very apologetically, just as a matter of form, and when Phyl told Julian, he threw back his head and laughed aloud. " It does seem silly," said Phyl. " After all, what could you have at tea to poison you, unless you had potted meat sandwiches ? And as for whisky . . . "

" Well, there are other sorts of poisoning besides food poisoning, my dear," said Julian. " Arsenic

or nitro-benzol." She might just as well get used to hearing arsenic spoken of, for this visit from the coroner's officer plainly meant that arsenic had been found.

The morning of the inquest was both wet and cold. Rain greyly drenched the mean, pseudo-gothic windows of the hall; the light within fell cold and grey on the downcast faces of the people gathered together in the unwilling duty of furnishing a disaster, to which they had already resigned themselves, with a painful and profitless epilogue. Sitting by Julian, looking round the court, at the coroner with his bird-like face, black moustache and small hands; at the pressmen, now scribbling, now sucking their teeth, their pencils; at Ruth, sniffing audibly—she'd caught cold at the funeral; at the family solicitor—he'd a cold too, but a chesty one; at the jurors, two spinsters of the landlady type and a woman who looked like a publican's wife, nine men, mostly of the artisan class, one obvious tradesman among them; at Mrs. Howard with her wispy grey hair, battered hat and frumpish waterproof, Phyl thought that tragedy, so far from being what poets make of it, is as dusty and futile and fleeting as everything else in the undignified life of man. Martin, living mentally and physically in the unspeakable ugliness of one-hundred-and-forty-six Alexandra Road, had preserved his æstheticism, but here it had all ended, in a story of revolting sickness told by a dowdy old woman in the bald light of this mean hall. " Exactly

at what time did the vomiting commence ? " asked the coroner, and Mrs. Howard's aggrieved voice went on. Here was no majesty nor dignity, nothing well nor good, only what was sordid and ordinary and mean.

When Mrs. Howard and Ruth had at last finished their evidence, Phyl was called, and Julian felt his first tremor of nervousness ; here was the chink in his armour. He was delighted, however, to see the excellent impression which she made. Socially awkward, nervous in drawing-rooms, on occasions like this she lost her shyness ; she answered clearly and simply the questions which were put to her, without digressions, in her charming voice. She had dressed very quietly, and wore dark furs which gave her an unwonted air of prosperity. She was very obviously the cultured mother of the nice boys to whom the dead man had acted as tutor, and what could have been more likely than that he should have desired to keep up a pleasant friendship by occasionally calling on her ? Something in the coroner's manner, something indulgent, respectful, showed Phyl the impression she had created. It was a false one. She hadn't been the cultured mother of nice boys ; she had loved and been loved by Martin. That had no bearing on his death, of course, but she felt ashamed that, although she had told the truth, she had misled the court ; and, when she saw Julian looking pleased, she was filled with a mad desire to get up and say, " He came to see me because we

loved each other." But, of course, she couldn't. They'd begin to think she's poisoned Martin because they'd quarrelled, or Julian, out of jealousy.

Julian was speaking now.

" I came home early on the afternoon of December the fourth because I had bought a couple of theatre tickets for myself and my wife, and that meant dressing for dinner and getting back to the West End again. I reached home round about five, and found Howard having tea with my wife."

" Were you expecting to see him ? " asked the coroner.

" Not more than any other acquaintance," said Julian blandly. " I knew that he was likely to pay us an occasional call."

" Your wife has told us that she and the deceased had finished tea. You had some fresh tea brought in ? "

" Yes. And my wife had another cup to keep me company. Howard did not have any more. As soon as I had finished, he got up to go. I offered him a whisky-and-soda, and we went into the dining-room. I poured out one for each of us."

" From this decanter ? "

The decanter which the coroner's officer had so apologetically removed from " Elsfield " was produced, and Julian readily agreed that it was his. " But it was fuller then," he said with a smile.

" It hasn't been refilled ? "

" No."

" And the soda-water ? "

" We finished a syphon, and I understand that it was collected with other empties by the grocer next day."

" The deceased seemed cheerful ? "

" Very cheerful. As far as I can recollect, we talked about the decoration of the dining-room."

" And then he wished you good-night and went away ? "

" Yes."

" Did he say where he was going ? "

" No. He said he must be off, or words to that effect. Just the conventional thing. I saw him to the gate and he turned in the direction of the station."

" What time would that be ? "

Julian spread out his hands.

" I couldn't say exactly. Certainly, it had not struck six."

" Can you throw any light on the question of how the deceased met his death ? "

Julian made a gesture of dissent.

" He had never talked to me about his personal affairs. We had been together on a holiday, and he was immensely popular with my boys, so we were more friendly than is perhaps usual in the circumstances, and I gathered that he wished to continue the friendship. But that's all."

" Thank you," said the coroner.

Julian's eyes went round the court. He was

pleased with himself. So admirably had he planned and acted that even in this court he had only lied once—when he had stated that he had not expected to see Martin. Only a genius, he thought, could have planned so simply; a lesser man would have constructed some rigmarole too elaborate to sustain. As he stepped down from the witness box he squared his shoulders and puffed out his chest, and he read in every face approval, and in some admiration, for a typically prosperous and honourable British citizen. He hoped that the analyst would be called next, while the impression lasted, but it was one o'clock now, and the coroner ordered an adjournment for luncheon.

Phyl and Julian went out into the unfamiliar locality, wandered down the street and found a Lyons' restaurant where they lunched. They did not discuss the inquest. Phyl felt guilty, because, though she had told the truth and nothing but the truth, she hadn't told the whole truth; she was worrying, and knew that if she confided in Julian he would laugh at her scruples; she longed for Martin's sympathy and so came near to tears. Julian ate rump steak nicely under-done, smacked his lips, grumbled at the waste of time. "That coroner fellow hasn't the brains of a louse. Bet you anything he doesn't get finished to-day." He hurried Phyl back into court; he didn't want to miss a minute of his show. To his disappointment, the next witness was Martin's headmaster, an elderly scholar, very much a fish out of water,

and obviously affronted at being forced to attend, on account of a junior master, this sordid and mundane occasion. His evidence was dull and immaterial. He gave Martin a good character, had last seen him on the football field, thought his health and spirits excellent. The effect of this evidence and the process of digesting rump steak almost sent Julian to sleep; several times his eyes actually closed. And after the headmaster came the steward; almost as dull was his information about Irish stew and cabinet pudding and the transport of such dishes from the kitchen to the dining-hall.

Then Miss Grace Baines was called, and the genteel, fluttered spinster who kept the school tuck shop stepped into the box. It appeared that on the afternoon of December the fourth, Martin had bought two apples . . . yes, Canadian ones . . . she sniffed into a white lace handkerchief. The thought of Martin wanting apples, eating apples, so human and characteristic a touch, affected Phyl; Julian felt a convulsive movement beside him, opened his eyes to see her searching in her handbag for her handkerchief while two bright tears dropped from her lashes on her furs. Her weakness irritated him, and, the digestive process being wellnigh over, he roused himself from his soporific mood. As the coroner said, "Thank you, Miss Baines. That will do," he sat up, blinked as though after forty winks on a Sunday afternoon, and prepared keenly, almost gladly, to meet a foeman worthy of his steel.

Sir James Davis was called, and the small, dapper man whose well-known hatchet face Julian had recognised on re-entering the court, stepped forward. When he had been sworn, the coroner addressed him with deference.

" Sir James, I understand that you have made an examination of the organs of the deceased Martin Howard. Will you kindly inform the jury of the result ? "

Sir James spoke quickly and quietly as though he had neither time nor energy to waste.

" I found that, without a doubt, the deceased had died from arsenic poisoning."

There was a sudden, tense, electric silence in the court, for a fraction of a second, no sound, no stir. The reporters' eyes brightened. Their pencils moved. From Ruth or Mrs. Howard came a long-drawn gasp. The headmaster removed his pince-nez and uttered quite audibly, " Tch, Tch." Phyl's lips parted. Her eyes stared like sapphires. Sir James's quick, low voice went on.

Only Julian did not hear what he was saying, did not relax from that first, tense pause. When Sir James had begun : " I found that, without a doubt . . . " Julian's glance had left the witness box to travel round the court and mark the effect of the words he could anticipate. As the specialist spoke the words, " arsenic poisoning," Julian found himself looking across a dark sea of heads, as eight months ago he had looked across the heaped earth beside an open grave, straight

into a pair of blue doll's eyes which knew . . . which knew . . . Christ help me! cried Julian's frozen heart; then, with an agonizing throbbing in his throat and wrists, his pulses beat again. Somehow he got control of himself, furtively wiped his forehead, moved his dry mouth until the saliva flowed again. Then, his fright seemed ridiculous. His half-brother was in court; he hadn't known it; their eyes had met suddenly; the fellow had always had doll's eyes and a vacant ghastly stare. Because a fellow who didn't like you gave you a nasty look, it didn't mean that he could read your thoughts. How could he? Julian had never believed in telepathy, nor even in the feelings that Phyl said she had—I *felt* he was going to say something awful . . . I *knew* that was going to happen. Womanly intuition! It's all rot, though God knows the fellow is womanish enough. God damn him! thought Julian. I've faced this whole court without a tremor; why should I jump at the sight of that bastard? He answered himself. Because Eric suspected something about Father, either all along or suddenly when he looked at me across the grave. But pride wouldn't allow that. How could he have suspected what even the doctor didn't suspect, what was so marvellously and yet so simply planned? And, if he does suspect, he can't do anything, thought Julian, his pulses slower, his forehead dry now. He can't stand up and accuse me with nothing to go on but his intuition—for still obstinately

existed the illogical, unreasonable fear. He's of no more importance than anyone who reads the papers to-morrow morning at breakfast and makes flippant guesses as people do. ' I think the Prebbles did it . . . ' ' I think the headmaster did it . . . ' ' I think a boy did it in return for a detention, and serve him right . . . '

" One point more, Sir James. Is it not possible for the action of the poison to have been hastened or retarded by circumstances such as the general state of the deceased's health, and whether it was taken on an empty stomach ? "

" To a certain extent, indubitably. But it is my considered opinion that it is unlikely, though not impossible, that the poison was administered before three o'clock on the Thursday afternoon."

The coroner said, " Thank you, Sir James," and Sir James stood down. After a moment's whispered conversation with an official, the coroner again adjourned the inquest for a week.

" There ! what did I tell you ? " said Julian to Phyl, as they walked out into the vestibule. He spoke in a casual tone, but at the same time he turned his eyes from side to side, searching the crowd of faces. When he caught sight of his half-brother, he took Phyl's arm and said, " You look tired to death, dear. I'm going to put you in a taxi and send you straight home. I'll follow you later. I want to have a word with one or two people. Next week we shall have to be legally represented and so on."

There was a cab-rank outside the hall, and docile Phyl allowed herself to be packed into a taxi. Julian turned back into the vestibule. His half-brother was at the door.

"Well, Eric! I saw you in court. Come along and have a drink," said Julian.

Eric's pink face brightened.

"Thanks," he said, "I will."

Julian led the way into the wet street, across the tramlines, and through the swing doors into the bar of the Harrington Arms. After the dismal court with its deathly purpose and the cold, wet street between, immensely comforting was the light and warmth and the genial smell of beer. "What will you have, Eric?" asked Julian.

"A B.-and-S., as you *are* so kind," said Eric. He propped his willowy figure against the bar and stared at Julian from beneath the tilted brim of a pale grey Homburg hat.

"A brandy-and-soda and a whisky-and-soda," said Julian in the severe tone he always used to barmaids.

"I'll eat a snack with it," said Eric, and took a couple of ham sandwiches from a glass stand on the bar.

"That's right," said Julian. He took up his glass and one-third of the golden liquid slipped down his throat like a shaft of sunlight. He gave Eric time to half-empty his glass before he spoke again.

"A sad case, this. What's your interest?"

Eric raised his glass to his lips again, emptied it, and set it down with a clink.

" Another ? " suggested Julian.

" Well, as you *are* so kind . . . " Eric took the cover off the glass stand and helped himself to a prawn.

" Yes, what's your interest ? " said Julian.

" The same as yours."

" Here's your brandy," said Julian. " But I don't see what you mean. I'm a witness. I knew the man."

" Well, I came to see how you got on."

" Really ? Have you a taste for this sort of thing ? "

" Which sort of thing ? "

" Inquests. I'd sooner keep away from them."

" So'd I," said Eric. Alcohol had already flushed his smooth cheeks to a girlish rose colour, and in contrast his eyes looked bluer than ever. His hat was on the back of his head now, and his overcoat was unbuttoned and revealed a pink shirt and collar and a cheap, smart tie. A piece of cress hung from the corner of his mouth.

" Why don't you, then ? " said Julian contemptuously.

Since his father's death, Eric had been, in his own phraseology, " under the weather." He had accepted his half-brother's invitation with the intention of getting a free drink, a bite of food, and perhaps the loan of a fiver. But he had meant to be very crafty and sleuth-like and as silent as the grave. Now he heard the contempt in Julian's

voice, and it goaded him to the fine, fearless speech of the slightly drunk.

" I read about this fellow in the *Evening Post*," he said. " They gave the mother's account. It interested me because I saw a sim . . . a simi . . . a likeness to the way poor old Dad went off. That sudden sickness after supper and the rest. 'Course, I shouldn't have been sufficiently interested to come to the inquest without I'd seen your name."

" What's that got to do with it ? "

" Well, it's funny, isn't it ? You had supper with poor old Dad, and a bite of something with this other fellow."

From the four corners of the saloon, a black mist gathered and closed over Julian's vision. He forced himself to speak from the dark.

" Well, what about it ? "

" It's funny, that's all."

" Father died of heart failure," said Julian quietly. " And this man Howard apparently of arsenic poisoning. I don't see any connection between the two deaths. If you are aiming at humour, I must say I think your reference to my father in the worst possible taste."

" You do, do you ? Well, brother Julian, let me tell you this ; your father cared a dam' sight more for me than for you, and, though he's dead and buried, I can get him to speak against you yet."

There was nothing pugnacious in Eric's attitude. Despite the brawling tone of his voice, he

still leaned in his limp, emasculate way against the bar. But Julian, the strong man, the prosperous, solid man, in his thick dark overcoat and newish bowler, recoiled as though from a blow. Exhumation! When he had thought: if he does suspect, he can't do anything, he hadn't thought of that, hadn't thought that this womanish chatterer could bear his tales to those who possessed the power to open the grave and tear out its secret. I'm done! I'm done! he thought, and Eric saw what Phyl had seen in the garden at Eastbourne, the rock topple, Julian's face change, its complacency wiped off, its colour fade, its muscles slacken, all the more horribly because of the bowler and the overcoat, worse that the rock should fall than the flower. But to Eric it was not pitiful. He had loved his old Dad. Death to him was a terrible thing, and murder the worst crime of all. He had the child's or the peasant's creed of an eye for an eye.

Julian said, "That's all nonsense. You're drunk." His dictatorial voice had thickened.

"Pardon?" said Eric.

Julian began to mutter, "I said that's absurd . . ." As he opened his mouth, the saloon doors swung to admit two pressmen whom he had noticed in court. "If you've finished," he said, "let's go. We can talk more freely elsewhere." But he was too late. One glance had been enough for the reporters. They hurried with lively steps across the saloon and stood beside him, pressing him to drinks.

" No, thank you," said Julian ; " No, no."

" A very sad case, Mr. Prebble," said the younger of the two men.

And Eric, who had been humming *Singin' in the Rain*, answered before Julian did. He said, " Extremely sad," and added, " I'm Prebble's half-brother, you know. Well, I don't mind if I do. A brandy-and-soda as you *are* so kind."

You drunken beast ! thought Julian. To think you've won against a man like me ! It's disgusting, unnatural. It can't happen. The battle is to the strong.

" Make it a quick one, Eric, and I'll drive you up to the West End," he offered. " I'm going that way."

" Is that gentleman really your half-brother, Mr. Prebble ? " said a voice at his elbow.

" That's my affair."

Eric was more communicative.

" Same father, but not the same mother," he explained with drunken amiability. " The black sheep and the white sheep, and the black sheep was the most beloved. 'Twas ever thus. Virtue has to bring its own reward."

" He's drunk," said Julian. " I'll call a taxi and take him home."

He hurried out into the street, signalled to a taxi, and returned to the now confidential group at the bar. " Come on, Eric," he said. " I've got a taxi waiting. I'll give you a lift home."

Eric looked over his shoulder at Julian. His answer was, " No fear ! "

"Don't you worry, Mr. Prebble, we'll look after him," said the younger of the reporters with a grin.

Julian went out into the street. He told the taxi driver to take him to the Underground Station; he wanted time to think things out before he reached his home. He started at once to clear the chaos in his mind. Eric will engineer an exhumation order, not by himself, perhaps —he won't carry much weight with the police or the Home Office; but, now the press have got hold of him . . . *It is a curious fact that Mr. Julian Prebble's father died of a sudden attack of sickness as recently as last March, leaving an estate of £50,000 nett personalty, of which Mr. Julian Prebble is the sole heir.* And arsenic doesn't deteriorate. They'll find it in Father's remains, and they've the motive hitting them in the face there; and their damned analyst has pointed the first finger at "Elsfield"; they'll ferret out about Phyl and that fellow; they've only got to ask her when she's on oath. I'm done. The only way out is to make a bargain with Eric, and that's not what he's after. It's spite, not money that's driving him, and a spite that was bred in him, all that his mother felt against my mother and against me. That talk about loving the dear old Dad is eyewash; how could anyone have loved that senile bag of bones? It's all wrong, thought Julian, getting out, paying the taxi, walking into the station, and an ineffable sadness filled him as he saw strength like a lovely bronze broken

in the aimless hands of idiot chance. That's the tragedy, that I should be betrayed by a drunken waster not fit to black my boots—like Christ was betrayed by Judas, he thought, instinctively hurrying down the stairs to catch a waiting west-bound train. He didn't catch it ; he wasn't the sort to risk his life jumping on a moving vehicle. He had to wait. There's not a man on this platform, he thought, who wouldn't back me against Eric. I'm a publisher and a householder, a husband and a father. I pay the rates and taxes, I vote and invest money and subscribe to charities ; he's an out-of-work actor, the frothy scum of the earth. Though Julian had often cried to God, he didn't really believe in an individual after-life ; man was *the poor insect . . . singing some few days to God of his youth and of his love and then silent for all eternity*. Now he was persuaded to the disagreeable belief that there's no plan, that it is chance, futile, senseless, flippant, which makes or mars. I was a fool to trust to right or might, he thought, squeezing into the next train, finding a seat in a first-class compartment ; a fool to trust to anything in this mad, whirling world. He wanted to think practically, to decide what he should say and do, but his aggrieved mind kept wandering back to the abstract side of his case. Only as he got nearer home and he began to say over and over to himself; what shall I do? what shall I do? he saw that there was nothing he could do but stand like a rock and watch the tide rise round him,

the inquest adjourned again, the exhumation order, Phyl's face when she read of it in the newspaper, the servants, Sir Curtis, the office staff, people in the street, cross-examination, all the slow torture of a civilised community's revenge. What would Phyl say, who, even if she were not in love with him, had lived with him and slept with him and mended for him, and his sons, and Sir Curtis, and the authors who'd done business with him, and the men who'd been boys at school with him? Julian's a murderer; Daddy's a murderer; Prebble a murderer! why, that must be J. F. Prebble who played in the second fifteen and was reserve for the school side. Wilful murder! They wouldn't be able to realise it any more than he could himself. You read about murder in the newspapers and think it's a shocking thing, something quite outside your own experience, something unreal, fantastic, unnatural that you don't need to worry about because you don't belong to the criminal classes, but are Julian Prebble. Yet what I did—just getting a little powder out of an old tin and putting it in Father's Ovaltine and that other fellow's whisky—that's murder, that's that shocking thing. And I shall hang for it, thought Julian, and ridiculously remembered the dangling figures on gibbets which he used to draw in the margins of his books at school. Hanging had meant as little as that to him all his life; so remote it was that you even made a joke of it in the same way as you said, 'We shall be in the workhouse by Christmas,'

or referred to a roughness on your skin as 'leprosy.'"

He changed his train at Earls Court. He was less than half-an-hour from the door of "Elsfield" now. He stood on Earls Court platform, waiting for a train. The platform was crowded. There is more room in the front of the train. He walked to the end of the platform to get away from the crowd, and stood out in the open. All at once, as he stood there, he felt lonely, a terrible, icy loneliness, there by himself with thoughts that the other people on the platform hadn't got; he wanted to be back among them, standing with them, thinking why the hell doesn't the Underground run more through trains, and how my feet ache, and the coal bill can wait till after Christmas, and what in the name of goodness shall I give the boys? He knew then that it wasn't capital punishment that he was afraid of, but of being alone, cast out, something that everyone loathed and hated, something different and terrible and remote from the homely, honest lives men lead. He turned and walked slowly back along the platform, like an ostracised school child, towards the bowlers and the dark overcoats and the tired faces of the respectable, prosperous, middle-class, fortyish men who were his kind. He could still mingle with them. And I shall to the end, he thought. I'll die one of them, if it means that I die now. I could fall from this platform, he thought, so that not a man on it would dream that it wasn't an accident. I'm not

a bungler. I shouldn't get rattled. I looked death in the eye too often out in France. *On December the sixteenth, as the result of an accident, Julian Farren, beloved husband of Phyllis Prebble, and partner in the firm of Curtis, Fayre and Haydon, aged forty-three,* and tears from the boys, " Daddy was such a pal to us," and a few from Phyl, and a decorous funeral in Putney Vale Cemetery, and a wreath with deepest sympathy from Sir Curtis Fayre, would be better than *At noon to-day the execution took place* . . . and Phyl trying to change her name and get out to Australia, and the boys growing up and never mentioning me, trying to live me down, loathing me for the shadow I'd be on their childhood and the handicap on their lives.

He stepped on the edge of the platform and looked down the rails. They fascinated him, not, as he read in books, suicides were fascinated by their serpentine smoothness, but because down there, between the rails, among the cinders and the spent matches and the cigarette ends, brooded such peace and quiet and safety from the horror that was approaching him. If I were dead, there'd be an end of it, he thought. Eric's spite is against me ; if I were dead, he'd drop the idea of an exhumation. And I should die Sir Curtis Fayre's partner, beloved husband of Phyllis Prebble ; ' my father, who won the M.C., and was one of the heroes of the Great War.' I should die respected. This last meant most of all to Julian. He hadn't bothered about being loved, but he'd

always wanted people to see him as he saw himself, honest, solid, British, a bit on the dull side, perhaps, but he hadn't been afraid to live, prosperous, kind to children and animals, a bit of a Philistine, nothing arty about him, a pipe-smoker, a public school-fellow to the core ; and that was a type respected from the Bank to Mandalay. And he was of that type so utterly that when he thought of his crime as a crime—which meant as something that had been found out—he felt just what men like him would feel when they read about it in the newspapers, incredulous surprise that a man of their sort could be a poisoner. To lose his position, to be uprooted like a plant from a gentleman's garden and thrown into a dust-bin, that to such a man was worse than losing the earth and its spring-times or what sad loyalty might yet be his.

I should die respected ! As he reached this point in his reflections, there was a roar in the tunnel and two growing pin-pricks of light, and, like some enslaved live thing, a west-bound train swung in and came to a standstill. Julian hurried towards it, but as usual, it was one of those damned Ealing trains, and he turned back. Two-thirds of the crowd on the platform surged in ; the rest stood back with exasperated faces. Doors slammed. Above the shattering din of the station, a whistle shrilled. Abruptly the train started, gathered speed. Julian looked down at the rails, at the peace and safety. I should be respected. Now ! Now ! He flung himself forward. The train was

on him, a wall of vermilion, the homely word, *Ealing*, above the lights. As he overbalanced, the thing was as good as done, I can't, he thought. I can't. Life's everything, any sort of life. Only to live, to see, to breathe, to be! He tried to throw his weight back, but the wet platform gave him no foothold. "Help!" he cried to his living kind on the platform; men helped you, didn't even let a murderer die too horribly. His outstretched hands clawed the air. "Without a doubt he made frantic attempts to save himself," stated one of the eyewitnesses on whose evidence was based the ultimate verdict of accidental death. He fell feet first, missed the live rails, rolled over sideways close by the platform, saw the black, shining arc of the wheel above him and screamed aloud . . .