

Benson Edward Frederic

Thorley Weir



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E.F. Benson

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CHAPTER I

The hottest day of all days in the hottest June of all Junes was beginning to abate its burning, and the inhabitants of close-packed cities and their perspiring congregations cherished the hope that before long some semblance of briskness might return into the ardent streets. Providence, it would appear, justly resentful at the long-continued complaints that hot summers were altogether a thing of the past, had determined to show that something could still be done in that line, but this rejoinder, humorous at first, had long ago ceased to amuse. From morning till night for the last six weeks an unveiled sun had shed a terrific ray on to the baked pavements and reverberating house-walls, but to-day had beaten all previous records, and a solemn glee pervaded the meteorological offices, the reports of which seemed to claim a sort of proprietary credit in the readings of their incredible thermometers.

Under these conditions it was with a sigh of relief that Arthur Craddock subsided into the corner-seat of a first-class smoking carriage at Paddington, finding that it was smoking, figuratively speaking, in less specialized a sense than that intended by the railway-company, for it had been standing for an hour or two in the sun outside the station. But he had clear notions about the risk of chill even on so hot a day, and when the train moved out from the dusky glass vault, he drew up the window beside which he sat, for it was impossible for him to take a seat with his back to the direction of progress, since the sight of receding landscape always made him feel slightly unwell. But, as he was alone in his carriage, there was no reason why he should not refresh his clay-coloured face with a mist of wall-flower scent which he squirted delicately over his forehead and closed eyes from a bottle in his silver-mounted dressing-case. Then he pulled down all the blinds in his carriage and sitting quite still in this restorative gloom indulged in pleasant anticipations.

He was a very large stout person, wearing his hair, which was beginning to grow thin, though no hint of greyness invaded its sleek blackness, conspicuously long. Round his ears and the back of his head it was still thick, but it no longer felt capable of growth on the top of his high peaked head, and in consequence he brushed it from the territories on the left side of his head over the top of his bald skull, and mingled the extremities of these locks with those that grew on the territories on the right of his head. It might thus be hoped that short-sighted and unobservant persons would come to the gratifying conclusion that the thatch was complete. He wore a small reddish moustache which in the centre of his immense colourless face might remind a Biblical beholder of the Burning Bush in the desert of Sin, for he looked vaguely debauched (which he was not) and overfed (which was probable to the verge of certainty). His hands, of which he was exceedingly proud, were small and white and plump; they were carefully manicured and decorated with a couple of rings, each set with a large cabochon stone. When, as now, they were not otherwise occupied, he habitually used one of them to caress the side of this desert of Sin, as if to make sure that no whisker was surreptitiously sprouting there. In dress, though he was certainly old enough to know better, he affected the contemporary style of a fashionable young man, and his brown flannel suit had evidently the benediction of the tailor fresh upon it. His tie, in which was pinned a remarkably fine pearl, was slightly more vivid than his suit, but of the same colour as his socks, a smooth two inches of which appeared below his turned-up trousers, and his shirt had a stripe of the same colour as his tie. No watch-chain glittered on the amplitude where it would naturally repose, but on his left wrist he wore a narrow band of gold braid with a lady's watch set in it. A white straw hat and brown shoes were the alpha and omega of his costume.

Though his face was singularly unwrinkled, except for rather heavy bags of loose skin below his eyes, it was quite evident that Arthur Craddock had left youth far behind him, but it would have been an imprudent man who would have wagered as to his ability to guess it within the limits of four or five years, for his corpulence was of the somewhat gross sort that may come early to an inactive man, in whose sedentary day dinner is something of an event. But it would not have required a very subtle physiognomist to conjecture for him an alert and athletic mind. His small grey eyes, which were unsurmounted by any hint of eyebrow, were, though a little red and moist, of a singular intensity in focus, and as active in poise and dart as a hovering dragon-fly, while even in repose they wore a notably watchful and observant look. His hands, too, which afforded him so constant a gratification, were undeniably the hands of an artist, long-fingered in proportion to the palms, and taper-nailed. Artist he was, too, to the very tips of those pink and shining triumphs of the manicurist, and though he neither painted nor played nor set forth on adventures in romance or poetry, his judgment and perception in all such achievements on the part of others was a marvel of unerring instinct, and was solidly based on an unrivalled knowledge of the arts. Not only, too, could he appreciate and condemn with faultless acumen, but side by side with that gift, and totally distinct from it, he had an astonishing *flair* for perceiving what the public would appreciate, and just as he was seldom at fault in true artistic judgment, so also was he an accurate appraiser of the money-earning value of play or picture. He was, it may be stated, not unconnected with the artistic columns of the daily press, and the frequent articles he contributed to three leading papers on pictures, concerts and plays, were often masterpieces of criticism, while at other times and for other reasons he plentifully belauded work in which, though he might artistically despise it, he was financially interested. His critical powers and the practical use to which he put them in purchases and in these penetrating paragraphs had proved most remunerative to him during these last fifteen or twenty years, and he had already laid by a very comfortable provision for his declining days, which he sincerely hoped were as yet very far off. He was fond of money, and, very wisely, had not the least objection to spending it in works of art which gave him pleasure, especially when his judgment told him that they would go up in value. Then, if a picture or a bronze could be sold again at a much higher price than that which he paid for it, he would part with it without any agony of reluctance. These transactions were conducted unobtrusively and it occurred to nobody to call him a dealer. If such a supposition ever occurred to himself, he put it from him with the utmost promptitude. But every quarter he paid the rent of Thistleton's Gallery in Bond Street, from which so many of the English masters set forth on their voyage to the United States.

His immediate anticipations, as has been already remarked, were pleasurable, for the Thames-side house at Thorley where he was to dine and sleep would certainly be a refreshing exchange from the baking airlessness of town. It was true that there would be nothing special in the way of dinner to look forward to, for his host Philip Wroughton was a penurious dyspeptic of long but hypochondriacal standing, and Arthur Craddock, made wise by a previous experience, had directed his valet to take with him certain palatable and nutritious biscuits in case dinner proved to be not only plain in quality but deficient in quantity. But there were two attractions which he was sure of finding there, each of which more than compensated the certain short-comings of the table. These were Philip Wroughton's daughter and Philip Wroughton's Reynolds: briefly, he hoped to possess himself of both.

It was impossible to decide between the rival excellencies of these. The Reynolds picture was exquisite: it represented his host's great-grandmother. But Joyce Wroughton his host's daughter might have sat in person for it, and the artist would have congratulated himself on having so supremely caught the frank charm and vigour of her beauty. More than most of the master's portraits it set forth a breezy and glorious vitality; it was as if Diana and an Amazon had been ancestresses to the sitter, in so swift and active a poise the slim white-clad figure paused with head turned and beckoning hand and smile before it passed up the glade of dark-foliaged trees behind it. How often had Craddock seen Joyce Wroughton in just such a momentary attitude as she swung across the lawn from her punting on the river, and turned to call her colliers lest they should enter the tent where her father sat and disturb

him at his employment of doing nothing at all. Craddock, sluggish of blood and corpulent of limb, found a charm of wonderful potency in the girl's lithe and athletic youth, and his own subtle intricate-weaving mind admired hardly less the serenity and simplicity of hers, which seemed as untroubled and unmorbid as that which he would conjecture for some white Hellenic marble. It cannot be truthfully stated that in the common acceptance of the word he was in love with her, but he immensely admired her, and, being of the age when a man says to himself that if he intends to marry he must without delay put out from the harbour of his bachelorhood, he had decided to set his sails. She, only just twenty years of age, was more than a quarter of a century his junior, but this seemed to him a perfectly satisfactory chronology, since for full twenty years more her beauty would but ripen and develop.

His desire to possess himself of the Reynolds portrait was in a sense more altruistic, since he did not propose to keep it himself. He was prepared to offer to the present owner of it what would certainly appear to one not conversant with salesrooms a very generous price, and he was also prepared to take a far more generous price for it himself from an American friend who was victim to a trans-Atlantic ambition to possess a dozen portraits by this master. He scarcely knew a picture from a statue, but he wanted pictures, and Craddock in previous transactions with him had learned not to be shy of asking enormous sums for them, since Mr. William P. Ward's comment was invariable, laconic and satisfactory. "I'm sure I'm very much indebted to you," was all he said, and proceeded to discharge his indebtedness.

Craddock's precautions with regard to the sun that beat on the carriage windows were quite successful, and he felt cool and presentable when he was shown into this riverside house and out again onto the lawn that bordered the Thames where tea was laid under the big plane tree that shaded a drowsy area of cool green. Joyce, inimitable save for the foreshadowing Sir Joshua, rose to receive him, forgetting to turn off the water from the urn which was ministering to the teapot. Upon which a thin hand came out of an encompassing chair, and a rather fretful voice said:

"The tea will be drowned, Joyce. Oh, is that Mr. Craddock? Charmed."

Having saved the tea from drowning, Philip Wroughton gave Craddock a sufficiently cordial welcome. He did not rise from his basket chair, but extended a welcoming hand. He had a footstool to keep his feet from any risk of damp from the scorched and arid grass, and a thin plaid shawl was laid across his knees, as a preventative of miasmatic humours reaching those joints. In person he was a wizened bird-eyed little man, fleshless and hollow-cheeked, and grey-haired, and by the side of his daughter he looked like a dried Normandy pippin compared to a fresh apple, sun-tinted and vivid-skinned. Beside him, chiefly concealed from view by the scarlet sunshade which cast a red glow on to her face, sat his mother, old Lady Crowborough, who was by far the most juvenile of any company in which she found herself. Not being on speaking terms with her elder son (though she spoke about him a good deal) she stayed with Philip whenever she found it convenient, and gave him a great deal of good advice, which he seldom acted upon. She delighted in her age, which she habitually exaggerated, and had now for several years said that she was ninety, though as a matter of fact she would not attain that agreeable age for several years yet. She was remarkable for her shrewdness, her memory and her health, and wore a rather girlish and simple costume with a flapping linen sun-bonnet. Time, that inexorable accountant, seemed to have passed over her page, and her face was still marvellously soft and unwrinkled, and her sight and hearing were yet acute and undimmed. Arthur Craddock had not expected to find her here, and he was not sure that the discovery pleased him, for she always produced in him a sensation of being detected.

Philip Wroughton continued his low-voiced and languid phrases of welcome.

"Charmed to see you," he said. "You know my mother, do you not? It is good of you to come down and see us in our retreat. I, with my wretched health, as you know, cannot leave home, and Joyce really prefers the river and her dogs and perhaps the society of her poor old father to the distractions of town. Eh, Joyce?"

Joyce might or might not have endorsed the filial sentiments thus attributed to her, but her opportunity of doing so was snatched from her by her grandmother who endorsed none of these things.

"It's all stuff and nonsense about your health, Philip," she said. "You would be as strong as me if you only would put your medicine bottles into the grate, and eat good nourishing food, instead of the slops you stuff yourself with. And as for Joyce preferring to spend her time with you, instead of dancing and flirting with all the agreeable young fellows in London, you know quite well that it's you who keep her mewed up here to carry your cushions and pour out your medicines and put up your umbrella."

Joyce interrupted this recital of menial duties with a laugh.

"Granny, darling," she said, "how many lumps of sugar?"

"Three if they're decent big ones," said Lady Crowborough with decision. "Tell us what's going on in town, Mr. Craddock."

Arthur Craddock habitually made himself agreeable when it was worth while, and here he had three persons whom he desired to stand well with – Philip Wroughton for the sake of the Reynolds, Joyce for her own sake, and Lady Crowborough for reasons of self-protection.

"A burning fiery furnace is going on in town, my dear lady," he said. "The heat has been a torture, and I only hope I have been expiating some crime. The worst of it is that I have searched my memory without any success for something I have done to deserve these flames. But I seem to have been almost priggishly virtuous. What do you think I can have done, Miss Joyce?"

Joyce put the three decent lumps into her grandmother's tea, and laughed again. She always felt a certain slight physical repulsion for this stout white man, though she recognised his agreeable qualities.

"Ah, how can I tell?" she said. "You have not made me your confessor."

Mr. Craddock remembered that he would probably not get very much dinner, and took a large soft bun with sugar on the top of it.

"I instantly offer you the post," he said, "though I can still think of nothing to confess. You will have a sinecure. And yet after all it was one's own choice to stop in town, and certainly there have been pleasant things going on. I suppose, too, that at this moment the keenness of my pleasure in sitting on this delicious lawn in the shade and coolness of your beautiful plane tree is enhanced by the contrast with the furnace I have escaped from. And will you take me out again in your punt after tea, as you did when I was here last? All the way down I have had a prospective vision of you looking like a Victory off some Greek frieze with your punt-pole, and of myself reclining on the cushions like – like a middle-aged but unintoxicated Silenus."

This speech, since not addressed to Lady Crowborough, was too lengthy for her taste.

"Nasty uncomfortable things are punts," she observed, "going crawling along with one person poking and fuddling away among the mud and eels at the bottom of the river, and dribbling the water from the pole over the other. Joyce made me go out with her yesterday, and one of her great dogs sat on my lap, and the other panted and slobbered over my frock, while the sun frizzled the marrow out of my bones. If I must go on the river, give me a motor-boat that takes you along instead of going backwards half the time."

"I think I shall not find it too chilly in the punt to-night, Joyce," said her father, "if I take the shawl that is next thickest to the one I have here. Or perhaps it would be more prudent to take both. Will you see to that, my dear, when you have finished tea, and tell them also to put dinner a quarter of an hour later. Then I shall be able to rest for a little after we get in. Let us start very soon. Bring Mr. Craddock one of my shawls, too; he will be likely to find it chilly after the heat of town. A Shetland wool shawl, Mr. Craddock, I find keeps one warm without any feeling of weight."

Lady Crowborough's impatience at her son's hygienic precautions fizzed and spurted again at this.

"And bring me my cough-drops, Joyce," she said, "and my goloshes, and my little fur-cape, and a digestive pill, and my liver-mixture. And don't forget to take some cotton wool, to put in your ears, and the eye-lotion. Lord save us, Philip! You and your Shetland shawls!"

"I envy you your robustness, dear mother," said he. "I only wish you had bequeathed me more of it."

Lady Crowborough had finished tea, and accompanied Joyce on her errand of Shetland shawls, thus leaving the two men together.

"Joyce will bring the punt around in ten minutes," said her father, "and in the interval I shall be glad to have a chat with you, Mr. Craddock. I have been considering the question of selling the Reynolds, if you remember our talk when you were last here, and I have come to the conclusion that it is really my duty to do so. I feel that I ought to spend next winter in some warm and sunny climate, where I may have a chance of recovering some measure of my ruined health. But that of course would cost money, and my wretched poverty puts it out of the question for me, unless I can sell some such possession. Joyce, too, poor girl, will enjoy a greater stir and gaiety than I can give her here. There is little enough of it in her life, though I know she finds compensation from its absence in the sedulous care with which she insists on looking after me. I dare say there will not be many more years of invalid-nursing before her. All I can do is to make them as little tedious as may be. Indeed, it is chiefly for her sake that I contemplate the sale of this picture."

He paused a moment and lit a curiously-smelling cigarette which counteracted a tendency to hay-fever. Like many people he was strangely credulous about his own statements, and came to believe them almost as soon as they were made. Indeed, on this occasion, before his cigarette was well alight, he fancied that in part at any rate his plans of wintering in some warm climate had been made for Joyce's sake.

"I think you mentioned some number of pounds you thought you could get me for my great-grandmother's picture," he said. "Five thousand? Was that the amount? I have no head for figures. Yes. And an American, was it not? I hate the thought of my picture going to America but poor men like me must not mind being kicked and plundered by the golden West. Probably it would be hung up in some *abattoir*, where oxen are driven in at one end, and tinned meat taken out at the other. And for once my mother agrees with my determination to sell it. She says that I cannot afford to have such a large cheque hanging framed in my study."

Arthur Craddock did not find much difficulty in sorting the grain from the husk, in this very characteristic speech. But he wisely treated it all as grain.

"I know well your solicitude for Miss Joyce's happiness," he said. "And I need not tell you how much it honours you. But with regard to the future home of your delightful picture I can assure you that there is no *abattoir* awaiting it. Mr. Ward has half a dozen Reynolds already, and some very notable examples among them. And, as I told you, I think there is no doubt he would give five thousand for it."

He caressed the side of his face, and finding no disconcerting whisker there, wondered how much he would actually venture to charge Mr. Ward for the picture.

"In fact I offer you five thousand for it here and now," he said. "Ah, here is Miss Joyce in her punt coming for us."

Philip Wroughton dismissed this insignificant interruption.

"Then call to her, Mr. Craddock," he said, "if you will be so good and tell her we shall be ready in five minutes. I cannot raise my voice above the ordinary tone of speech without excruciating pain. She will take a little turn in her punt, and come back for us. You will excuse me if I shut my ears when you shout; a loud noise tears my nerves to ribands."

Arthur Craddock got up.

"I will go and tell her," he said.

"So good of you: I am ashamed to trouble you," said Wroughton, not moving.

He walked down to the edge of the lawn, where was the landing-stage.

"We are talking business, Miss Joyce," he said, "so will you come back for us in five minutes. You have just stepped off some Greek frieze of the best period, let me tell you. I long to recline like a teetotal Silenus of the worst period on those cushions. In five minutes, then?"

Joyce leaned towards him on her punt-pole and spoke low.

"Oh, Mr. Craddock," she said. "Are you talking about the Reynolds? Father told me he was thinking of selling it. Do persuade him not to. I am so fond of it."

She gave him a little friendly nod and smile.

"Do try," she said. "Yes, I will come back in five minutes. There's a swans' nest among the reeds down there, and I will just go to see if the cygnets are hatched out yet."

Wroughton looked languidly at him on his return.

"Joyce has a ridiculous affection for that portrait," he said, "and I have a reasonable affection for it. I can't afford to look at it: I am far more in need of a suitable winter climate than of any work of art. Yet sometimes I wish that these Pactolus-people had left us alone."

This was not a strictly logical attitude, for it was obviously possible to refuse the offer, and leave the Pactolus-people alone. Nothing more than an opportunity had been offered him, of which he was free to take advantage or not, just as he chose. As for Craddock, he felt himself advantageously placed, for if he upheld Joyce's wish, he would ingratiate himself with her, while if the sale took place, he would reap an extremely handsome profit himself. For the moment the spell of the riverside Diana was the most potent.

"I can understand Miss Joyce's feeling," he said, "and yours also, when you wish that the Pactolus-people as you so rightly call them had left you alone. I respect those feelings, I share and endorse them. So let us discuss the question no further. I will tell my friend that I cannot induce you to part with your picture. No doubt he will find other owners not so sensitive and fine as you and Miss Joyce. Of course he will be disappointed, but equally of course I gave him to understand that I could in no way promise success in the enterprise."

Even as he spoke the balance wavered. He could tell Joyce that he had urged her father not to part with his picture, and her gratitude would be earned, and he knew that he wanted that more than he wanted to gratify her by his success. Thus it was satisfactory to find that he had not disturbed the stability of Wroughton's determination, and his profit was safe also.

"Ah, that is all very well for you," said Wroughton, "with your robust health and your ignorance of what it means to be so poor that you cannot afford the alleviation which would make life tolerable. Beggars cannot afford to be so fine. Even Joyce does not know what I suffer in this miserable swamp during the winter months. But I am convinced she cannot have her father and the picture with her, for I am sure I should never survive another winter here."

His thin peaked face grew soft with self-pity, which was the most poignant emotion that ever penetrated to his mind.

"She would bitterly reproach herself," he went on, "if after I am gone, she conjectured that I might have been spared to her a little longer if I had been able to spend the winter months in a climate less injurious to me. She does not really know how ill I am, for of course I do not speak to her about that. I want to spare her all the anxiety I can, and in speaking to her of my project of spending the winter in some sunny climate, in Egypt or on the Riviera, I have laid stress only on the pleasure that such a visit will give her. No, no, Mr. Craddock, my poor Joyce and I must put our pride in our pocket; indeed there is nothing else there. I will close with your American friend's offer: my mind is made up. Naturally I should want a good copy of the picture made for me without cost to myself. It might be possible for you in your great kindness to arrange that for me. You might perhaps make it part of the condition of sale: five thousand pounds and a good copy."

Craddock waved this aside. He had delicately disposed of another bun.

"That is easily arranged," he said, wiping his fingers that were a little sticky with the sugar on his fine cambric handkerchief. "I feel sure I can guarantee his acceptance of your terms."

Philip Wroughton coughed gently once or twice. He always said that questions concerning money were distasteful to him. It is quite true that they were so, when they concerned his parting with it.

"And am I right in supposing that you would expect whatever the usual commission happens to be?" he asked. "If so, shall I pay it, or your friend?"

Craddock interrupted him with the promptitude born of horror at such a suggestion.

"I beg you not to hurt my feelings by proposing anything of the kind," he said.

Philip Wroughton instantly and with apologies withdrew his inhumanity.

By this time Joyce had returned from her expedition to the swans' nest and was waiting for them. She had already put into the punt a selection of grey Shetland shawls, with a quantity of cushions, and the task of making her father quite secure and comfortable next demanded all her patience and serenity. But she had to make one more expedition to the house to get his white umbrella, for the heat of the sun not yet set might easily penetrate the black one which he had brought with him. He needed also a fly-whisk in case the midges became troublesome, a binocular glass, and the very careful disposition of cushions so that no draught could conceivably come through the cane back against which he reclined. Then, when he was quite settled, Craddock got in, and Joyce pushed out into the stream leaving two pairs of pathetic dogs' eyes wistfully regarding her from the bank. But it was impossible to take Huz and Buz, his brother, when her father was in the punt, for they fidgeted him on these hot days with their panting, and could not be relied on to keep perfectly and permanently motionless.

Joyce, as was usual with her, was bareheaded, and was clad in a very simple home-made skirt of butcher's blue much stained with water and bleached with sun, and a white flannel blouse the arms of which she had rolled up to above her elbows; but Craddock, who was a skilled appreciator with regard to female apparel, would not have had her change her really elementary garments for the most sumptuous and glittering fabrics. In general, he entirely believed that a woman's beauty is enhanced by the splendour of her attire, and saw the value of satin and tiaras. But there was something so completely satisfying and suitable in this rough river-dress that he would not have added any embellishment to it, nor have expunged a single water-stain or sun-bleach. The girl's superb slim figure, divine in the elasticity of its adolescence, now bending to her stroke, now rigidly erect again as she trailed her pole back through the frilled water, stood out in the simplicity of Attic relief with its plain white and blue against the reflected greens and browns which the trees and shady places cast onto the polished mirror of the water. Her arms bare to above the elbow showed the full roundness and soft, slim strength of her beautiful limbs, and for the most part, except when she turned at the end of her stroke, her face was in profile to him, giving him the short, straight nose of the Reynolds picture, the fine mouth with generous underlip a little drooping, and the firm oval of the curve from chin to ear. Here in the stern, while she made these magnificent sweeps and curtsies with her punt-pole, were sitting her father and himself, and he had no need to glance at Mr. Wroughton, or to think consciously of himself with his obese and middle-aged figure in order to remind himself of the glorious contrast between the passengers and the splendour of their long-limbed conductress. She was Thames, she was June, she was the enchanted incarnation of all that was immortally young and beautiful, and though naturally vain, he felt delighted to be part of her foil, to set her off more than any "silk and fine array" could have done. For the first time he hardly knew whether he did not admire the Reynolds portrait so much because it was so like her. There was the same spirit of wind and woodland and sunshine and joyous serenity about it. The type was here incarnate, and he bathed his mind in it, washing off, temporarily at least, the merchandise and tittle-tattle of its normal environment. Surely this admiration of his touched ecstasy, touched love.

There soon came a turn in this sunny fluid reach of Thorley, and Mr. Wroughton, without imprudence, furlled his white umbrella, and adjusted his binoculars for a languid survey of the shadowed river. On one side a wood of tall virginal beeches clad the hill-side down to the edge of the towing-path, and the huge curves of aspiring tree-tops climbed unbroken to the summit of the hill. A fringe of hawthorn-trees, cascades of red and white, bordered this fairyland of forest, and below the towing-path a strip of river-fed grasses and herbs of the water-side were fresh and feathery. Spires of meadow-sweet reared their stiff-stemmed umbrellas of cream-colour, and loosestrife pointed its mauve spires into the tranquil air. The dog-rose spread its maiden-hued face skywards, with defence of long-thorned shoots, and lovely sprays with half-opened chalices hung Narcissus-like above the tranquil tide. Below the water waved secret forests of river-weed, with darting fishes for birds in the drowned branches, that undulated in the stream, and here and there tall clumps of rushes with their dry brown blooms wagged and oscillated mysteriously to the twitchings of unseen currents. To the left the ground was low-lying in stretch of tree-bordered meadow, and from not far in front of them the sleepy murmur of Thorley weir sounded with the cool melodious thunder of its outpoured and renewed waters. Willows fringed the banks, and glimpses of meadow behind them, lying open to the level rays of the declining sun, shone with their rival sunlight of buttercup and luxuriant marsh marigold. Birds were busy among the bushes with supper, and resonant with even-song, and jubilant thrushes were rich with their rapturous and repeated phrases. And Arthur Craddock with his swift artistic sense, not too sophisticated for simplicity, saw with an appreciation that was almost tremulous how all this benediction of evening and bird-song and running water was reflected and focussed in the tall bending figure of this beautiful girl, and in her vigour and in the serenity of her brown level eyes. She was in tune with it, beating to its indwelling rhythm, a perfect human instrument in this harmony and orchestra of living things, part of it, thrilling to it, singing with it...

And the fact that he saw this so strongly, appreciated it so justly, measured the myriad miles he was distant from loving her. An infinite hair-breadth placed him further from love than is the remotest star from the revolving earth.

They glided up opposite a juncture of streams. To the right lay the main body of the river towards Thorley lock, to the left a minor stream hurried from the low-thundering weir. Joyce pushed strongly outwards on the right of the punt, and turned it with frill of protesting water into the narrower and swifter stream, willow-framed on both sides. Here there was shallower and more rapid water, that gleamed over bright gravel-beds, and even as they turned a king-fisher ashine with sapphire and turquoise wheeled like a jewelled boomerang close in front of them, giving a final hint of the gleaming romance and glory that lies so close below the surface of the most routinized and rutted life. They made a sharp angle round a corner, and close in front of them was the grey spouting weir, and the deep pool below it, lucid with ropes and necklaces of foam and iridescent bubble. A long spit of land jutted out into the river and on it was a grey canvas tent.

Joyce had been punting on the right of the boat with her back to this, but just as they came opposite to it, the shifting current of the stream thrown across it by this spit of land made it advantageous to change the sides of her poling, and from close at hand she saw the tent and the presumed inhabitants thereof, two young men, one perhaps eighteen years old, the other some four or five years his senior. They were as suitably clad as she and more scantily, for a shirt and a pair of trousers apiece, without further decoration of tie or shoe or sock, was all that could be claimed for either of them. The younger was utterly intent on some elementary cooking-business over a spirit-lamp; the elder with brush and palette in hand was frowningly absorbed in a picture that stood on an easel in front of him. So close to the river-bank was the easel set, that it was impossible not to apprehend the vivid presentment that stood on it: there was the weir and the nude figure of a boy on the header-board in the act of springing from it into the water. Then at the moment when the punt was closest, the artist, hitherto so intent on his picture that the advent of the punt was as unnoticed by him as by the boy who bent over the spirit-lamp, looked away from his canvas and saw them. Thereat

he attended no more to his work, but merely stared (rudely, if it had not been instinctively) at Joyce with young eager eyes, half-opened mouth, vivid, alert, and suitable to the romance of the river-side and the pulse of the beating world. It seemed right that he should be there; like Joyce and the willow-trees, he belonged to the picture that would have been incomplete without him, young and smooth-faced, and barefooted and bright-haired.

On the instant the cooking-boy spoke, high and querulously.

"Oh, Charles," he said, "this damned omelette won't do anything. It's a sort of degraded glue."

Joyce laughed before she knew she had laughed, with her eyes still on Charles. Indeed she hardly knew she laughed at all, any more than a child knows, who laughs for a reason as primal as the beat of the heart. The blood flows... Then, still primally, she saw his responsive amusement, and as they laughed, a glance as fresh as the morning of the world passed between them. She had looked at him no longer than it took her to pull her punt-pole up to her side again, then turning her head, in obedience to the exigence of another stroke, she looked away from him. But it seemed to her that that one moment had been from everlasting. It was the only thing that concerned her, that meant anything... And the strange fantastic moment was passed. Craddock's voice terminated it.

"Your glasses for a second, Mr. Wroughton," he said, and without waiting for verbal permission he snatched them up with a quickness of movement that was rare with him, and had one fleeting look at Charles' picture. The next stroke of the punt-pole took them round the spit of land into the bubble and foam of the bathing-pool below the weir.

Joyce skirted round this, keeping in shallow water and out of the current. A backwash of water made it unnecessary for her to exert herself further for a moment, and she turned full-face to the two men. Something within her, some indwelling beat of harmony with the simple and serene things of the world, made a smile, as unconscious as her laugh had been, to uncurl her lips.

"What a jolly time those two boys are having," she said. "I hope the omelette will cease to be degraded glue. And, Mr. Craddock, wasn't Charles – the cook called him Charles – wasn't Charles painting rather nicely? Did you see?"

Certainly Craddock had seen, though he wanted to see again, but it was her father who answered.

"I think we will turn and go home, Joyce," he said. "It will be chilly at sunset. What have you done with my second shawl?"

Joyce laid down the dripping punt-pole.

"Here it is," she said. "Will you have it over your shoulders or on your knees?"

The bows of the punt were caught by the weir-stream, and the boat swung swiftly round.

"Take care, Joyce," he cried. "You will have us swamped. And you should not put down your punt-pole in the boat. It has wetted me."

Joyce spread the second shawl over his knees, and tucked the edges of it round him.

"No, dear, it hasn't touched you," she said, "and we aren't going to be swamped."

She took up her pole again, and a couple of strokes sent them swiftly gliding down the rapid water. Next moment they were again opposite the tent; one boy was still stirring the deferred omelette, the artist with brush still suspended had his eyes fixed on their punt. Once again Joyce's glance met his, and once again Arthur Craddock picked up Wroughton's glasses, and got a longer look at the picture on the easel, before they floated out of range. He was even more impressed by this second glance; there was a vitality and a sureness about the work which was remarkable. For the moment the thought of the Reynolds, and even Joyce herself, blue and white with the background of feathery willow trees, was effaced from his mind. Certainly the boy could paint, and he was for ever on the look-out for those who could paint, more particularly if they were young and unknown. He felt certain he had never seen work by this young man before, for he could not have forgotten such distinctive handling. As certainly he would see artist and canvas again before he left Thorley. This was the sort

of opportunity with which his quick unerring judgment was occasionally rewarded. There might be a bargain to be made here.

Philip Wroughton was in amazingly genial humour that night, and read them extracts about the climate of Egypt from a guide-book. He had quite an affecting and tender little scene with Joyce, in the presence of Arthur Craddock on the subject of the sale of the picture, and had told her with a little tremble of his voice that it was for her to choose whether she would part with the portrait or himself, according to the formula he had already employed in discussing the matter with Craddock. On this second repetition it had gained reality in his mind, and Joyce with her sweet indulgence for all that concerned her father did him the justice of recognizing that to him this tissue of imagination was of solid quality. Somehow the prospective loss of the picture, too, did not weigh heavily with her, for she was conscious of a sunlight of inward happiness which could not be clouded by any such event. She had no idea from whence it sprang, it seemed to be connected with no particular happening, but was like one of those hours of childhood which we remember all our lives when we were intensely and utterly happy for no definite reason. Never, too, had she seen her father more alive and alert, and he went so far as to drink nearly a whole glass of the bottle of champagne which he had opened for his guest, to wish prosperity and a happy home for the portrait. But, in this established imperfection of human things, he had slight qualms on the wisdom of this daring proceeding, and bade himself remember to take a little digestive dose as soon as dinner was over.

"With a good copy here in its old place," he said, "I have no doubt that we shall not really miss it. Joyce, my dear, these beans are not sufficiently cooked. And, Mr. Craddock, I hope you will arrange that the transaction shall be quite private. We, Joyce and I, do not want the fact that I have had to sell the picture publicly known."

Lady Crowborough gave a little shrill laugh at this, without explanation of her amusement.

"It shall not be spoken of at all," said Craddock, "nor of course will the picture be seen in London. It shall go straight from your house to Philadelphia. Why, even your servants need not know. The copy will one morning take the place of the original, which I will arrange shall not be moved until the copy is ready. I will get a copyist to do the work here, if that is agreeable to you. Mr. Ward naturally will want to see his picture before the purchase is complete, but you need not see him. He will call at a time convenient to yourself. But should you care to see him, you will find him a very agreeable fellow."

Mr. Wroughton held up his hand which was thin almost to transparency.

"No, spare me the sight of my executioner," he said.

"I don't know where you get all these fine feelings from," remarked his mother. "Not from my side of the family. I'll see Mr. Ward for you, and see if I can't get him to buy some garnets of mine that I never wear. I shall like a month or two in Egypt with you, Philip."

"Too long a journey for you, mother, I am afraid," said Philip hastily.

"There! I knew you'd say something mean," said she, rising. "Well, I've finished my dinner, and I shall get to my Patience."

The night had fallen hot and starry and still, and though it was not to be expected that Mr. Wroughton should risk himself in the air after dinner, Craddock and Joyce at his suggestion strolled down to the river's edge in the gathering dusk. The even-song of birds was over, and bats wheeled in the darkening air, and moths hovered over the drowsy fragrance of the flower-beds. From somewhere not far away sounded the tinkle of a guitar accompanying some boyish tenor, and Joyce without thought, found herself wondering whether this was the voice of Charles of the unknown surname, or the anonymous fashioner of the omelette. The tune was tawdry enough, a number from some musical comedy, and though the performer had no particular skill either of finger or throat, the effect was young and fresh, and not in discord with the midsummer stillness. Something of the same impression was made on Arthur Craddock also, who listened with an indulgent smile on his big face that gleamed whitely in the faded day and dimness of stars.

"He does not know how to play or sing very much," he said, "but it is somehow agreeable though a little heart-rending to my middle-age. He is clearly quite young, his voice is unformed yet, and I should guess he is thinking of Her. Envious young wretch! For though, Miss Joyce, we miserable ones go a thinking of one or another Her all our lives, they cease to think of us, just when we need them most."

There was considerable adroitness in this speech as a prelude to greater directness, and he looked at her out of his little grey eyes with some intentness. She seemed more Diana-like than ever in this grey glimmer of starlight: it really seemed possible that she would spring up from the earth to meet the tawny moon-disc that was even now just rising in the East, and charioteer it over the star-scattered fields of heaven. She seemed dressed for her part as Mistress of the Moon, all in white with a riband of silver in her bright hair.

"But what of us?" she said lightly. "Do not you men cease to think of us even before we are middle-aged?"

Suddenly it struck Craddock that no more heaven-sent opportunity for carrying out the second of the purposes that had brought him down here, could possibly be desired. He was in luck to-day, too: the business of the portrait had been carried through so smoothly, so easily. But immediately he became aware that he was not, in vulgar parlance, quite up to it. He needed support, he needed her father's consent, but above all he needed the imperative call, the hunger of the soul. Clearly, too, her words did not refer, however remotely, to herself and him, he felt that they were spoken quite impersonally. And immediately she changed the subject.

"I have to thank you," she said, "for trying to dissuade my father from selling the portrait. He told me you had suggested that he should not. That was kind of you."

He caressed the side of his face with the usual gratifying result.

"I found his mind was made up," he said, "though in accordance with your request I suggested he should not sell it. Always command me, Miss Joyce, and I will always fly on your quests. I am aware that I do not look particularly like a knight-errant, but there are motor-cars and railway-trains nowadays which transport us more swiftly and less hazardously than mettlesome chargers, especially if we can't ride."

He had again made himself an opening, but again he found when he came close that it was barricaded to him. But this time some hint of his intentions, though he could not manage to carry them into effect, was communicated to her, and conscious of them, and uncomfortable at them, she again changed the subject.

"Oh, I am not going to ask you to take the train to-night," she said. "The most I shall ask of you is that you play *bélique* with my father by and by. I play so badly that it is no fun for him. Hark, the singing is coming closer."

They had come to the landing-stage at the far end of the lawn, and looking up the tranquil lane of the river Joyce saw that the sound came from a Canadian canoe which was drifting downstream towards them. The boat itself was barely visible in the shadow of the trees: it was conjectured rather than seen by the outline of shirt-sleeves that outlined it, and it was on the further side of the stream. By this time the moon had swung clear to the horizon, and though the boat was still shadowed, Joyce and Craddock standing on the lawn were in the full white light. At the moment the musical comedy song came to an end, and the voice of some imprudent person from the canoe, forgetting the distinctness with which sound traverses water, spoke in a voice that was perfectly audible to Joyce, though not to Craddock.

"Charles, there's the girl of the punt and her fat white man," it observed.

Charles was more circumspect. His answer was a murmur quite inaudible, and instantly he thrummed his guitar again. The melody was new to Joyce, and though he might not have great skill in singing, he had a crisp enunciation, and the delicious old words were clearly audible:

"See the chariot at hand here of Love
Wherein my Lady rideth."

Louder and more distinct every moment, as the canoe drifted closer came the beautiful lyric. The singer was not using more than half his voice, but as the distance between canoe and audience diminished, the light boyish tenor was sufficiently resonant to set the windless air a-quiver. Just as the canoe emerged into the blaze of moonlight opposite came the final stave, and the white-shirted singer sang from a full and open throat:

"Or have smelt o' the bud o' the briar?
Or the nard in the fire?
Or have tasted the bag of the bee?
O, so white, O, so soft, O, so sweet is she!"

The silence of the night shut down like the lid of a jewel-box. Then after a little while came the drip of a paddle, and the canoe grew small and dim in the distance down-stream.

"Those jolly boys again," said Joyce.

Arthur Craddock heaved a long sigh, horribly conscious of his years and riches, and Joyce heard the creak of his shirt-front.

"That young man has diplomatic gifts," he said. "It is clear that he intended to serenade you, and he chose the far side of the river, so as to make it seem that he had no intention of any kind. It is a reasonable supposition that if serenading was his object, and it certainly was, he might be supposed not to see you standing here. So he serenaded with the open throat. If I tried to do the same, which sorely tempts me, I should only convince you that I had not an open throat but a sore one. Nobody has ever heard me sing, not even when I was as young as that white shirted youth in the canoe. He will paddle back to his tent before long, unless you stay here visible in the moonlight, and dream steadily about you till morning."

Joyce laughed.

"Oh, what nonsense, Mr. Craddock," she said, knowing in the very secret place of her girl's heart that it was not nonsense at all. "Boats with guitars and singers go by every night, and often half the night. They can't all be serenading me."

"I cannot imagine why not. A Mormonism of serenading young men is not illegal. I would join them myself, Miss Joyce, if I could sing, and if I did not think that any Canadian canoe in which I embarked would instantly sink."

Philip Wroughton, in addition to the glass of champagne he had drunk at dinner permitted himself the further indulgence of sitting up for nearly an hour beyond his usual bedtime to talk to his guest and read more about the delectable climate of the Upper Nile. While Craddock and Joyce were out in the garden, a train of thoughts had been suggested to him by his very shrewd mother before she began her Patience, which he was preparing to indicate ever so lightly to that gentleman after Joyce had gone upstairs. "He's got your picture, Philip," said that observant lady, "and now he's after your daughter. Why don't you send Joyce up to town for a month, and give the girl a chance? You're a selfish fellow you know, like all Wroughtons." But she had not succeeded in provoking him to a retort, nor had she affected the independence of his own conclusions. It required no great perspicacity to see that Craddock was considerably attracted by the girl, and it seemed to her father that she might easily marry less suitably for him. She had led a very solitary and sequestered life with him, and he did not propose to alter his habits in order that she might come more in contact with the world. True, in this projected Egyptian winter she was likely to meet more young men than she had ever come across in her life before, but he could not imagine any one who would suit him (as if it was his own marriage that was in contemplation) better than Craddock. Philip found him quiet and deferential

and agreeable, and since it was certainly necessary that Joyce and her husband (if she was permitted to marry) should be with him a good deal, these were favourable points. He detested young men with their high spirits and loud laughs and automatic digestions, and he did not for a moment intend to have such a one about the house. Furthermore Craddock was certainly very well off (Philip would have had a fit if he had known that he and his picture were in the act, so to speak, of enriching him more) and it was clearly desirable to have wealth about the house. Possibly some one more eligible might discover himself, but Philip had little difficulty in convincing himself that he would be failing in his duty towards his daughter if he did not let Craddock know that his attentions to Joyce were favourably regarded by her father. But if his meditations were stripped of the fabric of unrealities, until truth in bare austerity was laid open, it must be confessed that he planned Joyce's possible marriage with a single eye for his own comfort.

A game of *béziq* succeeded Craddock's stroll with Joyce and a cigarette with a whisky and soda consoled him for the withdrawal of the ladies.

"And you have positively to go up to town again to-morrow," said Philip. "Cannot we by any means persuade you to stay another night? You in your modesty have no idea what a refreshment it is to us in our retirement to get a whiff of air from the busy bustling world. Yes, I may say 'us,' for my dear little Joyce was so pleased at your coming. Would you not be more prudent to close that window? I am sure you are sitting in a draught."

This, of course, meant that Philip was, and Craddock did not misunderstand.

"I was saying that Joyce was so pleased," repeated her father.

"I ask nothing better than to please Miss Joyce," said Craddock.

"You do please her: I am sure of it. Dear Joyce! I know it cannot be long that I shall be able to give her a home. Her future continually occupies my thoughts. I daresay she will meet someone when we winter in Egypt who will attract her. She is not ill-looking, is she? I think there must be many suitable men whom she would be disposed to regard not unfavourably. Yes, yes."

It was all spoken very softly and tunefully: the calm sunset of declining day seemed to brood over it. The effect was that Arthur Craddock got up and paced the room once or twice in silence.

"Will you give me your permission to ask Miss Joyce if she will make me the happiest of men?" he asked.

"My dear friend!" said Philip, with hand outstretched.

CHAPTER II

Dawn was brightening in the sky though the sun was not yet risen when Charles Lathom awoke next morning in the tent by the river-side. Close by him in the narrow limits of their shelter his brother Reggie was lying on his back still fast asleep with mouth a little parted, a plume of tumbled hair falling over his forehead, and a bare brown arm and shoulder outside the sheet in which he was loosely wrapped. Late last night, after they had got back from their moonlit drift down the river, Reggie, who, to do him justice, had done all the paddling so as to leave Charles free to serenade, saw the propriety of one dip in the pool below the weir before bed, and had come back into the boat dripping and refreshed and glistening, and without further formality of drying, had curled himself up and gone to sleep with a mocking reference to the lady of the punt. The picture of him taking a header into the pool, now on the point of completion, leaned against the tent-side, and a couple of bags gaping open and vomiting clothes and brushes, and a box of provisions, the lid of which did duty for a table, completed the furniture of the tent. Charles got up quietly, so as not to disturb the sleeper, and went out into the clean dewy morning. The thickets behind their encampment were a-chirrup with the earliest bird-music of the day, and high up in the zenith a few wisps of cloud that had caught the sun not yet risen on the earth itself, had turned rosy with the dawn. The spouting of the weir made a bass for the staccato treble of the birds, but otherwise the stillness of night was not yet broken. Little ripples lapped at the side of the Canadian canoe drawn half out of the water onto a bank blue with forget-me-not, and a tangle of briar-rose with cataract of pink folded petals hung motionless over the water. Then with a sudden shout of awakened colour the first long level rays of the sun sped across the meadows, and with the sigh of the wind of dawn the world awoke.

The morning light was what Charles needed for his picture, but not less did he need his brother, for the painting of the braced shoulder-muscles of his arms as they pointed above his head for the imminent plunge. Sun and dappled shade from the trees that bounded the meadow just beside the weir fell onto his naked body, making here a splash of brilliant light, here a green stain of sunlight filtering through the translucent leaves, while his face and the side of his body seen almost in profile were brilliantly illuminated by the glint from the shining pool below him. But underneath these surface lights there had to be indicated the building and interlacement of the firm muscles and supple sinews of his body. He had all but finished them, he had all but recorded what he saw, but it was necessary that Reggie should stand for him just a little while more. Meantime, since it was still so early, and his brother still so profoundly dormant, there was a little more work to be done to the ecstatic dance of sunlight on the pool. Just at the edge the shadow of the wall of the weir lay over it, and it was deep brown with a skin of reflected blue from the sky, but a few yards out the sun kindled a galaxy of golden stars, flowers of twinkling and dazzling light.

He got his picture out of the tent, set it on its easel, and put a kettle of water on the spirit-lamp. It was still far too early to have breakfast, but a cup of tea brought presently to Reggie's bedside might tend to make him unresentful of being awakened when Charles found he could get on no further without him. So when this was ready, Charles rattled the sugar in its tin loud enough to wake not one only but seven sleepers, and Reggie sat up with a justifiable start.

"What the deuce – " he began.

"Sorry," said Charles. "I'm afraid I made rather a row. But I've made some tea, too. Have a cup?"

"Of course. Is it late?"

"Well, no, not very. I've been up some little time painting. But I can't get on any more without you!"

Reggie gave a great yawn.

"I suppose that means you want me to turn out, and stand with my arms up on that header-board. It's lucky I have the patience of an angel."

"Archangel," said Charles, fulsomely. "You've been a real brick about it."

"And will you get breakfast ready if I come now?"

"Yes, and I'll make both beds."

Reggie accordingly got up and glanced at the picture as he passed it on his way to the header-board.

"I suppose I am like a dappled frog, if you insist on it," he said, "but a devilish finely-made young fellow."

"Absolute Adonis," said Charles humbly. "Oh, Reggie, stand exactly like that as long as you possibly can. That's exactly right."

The work went on in silence after this, for the modelling of muscle and flesh below this checker of light and shade and reflection was utterly absorbing to the artist. He had tried all ways of solving this subtle and complicated problem: once he had put in the curves and shadows of the tense muscles first, and painted the diaper of sun and shade on the top of it, but that made the skin thick and muddy in texture. Once he had mapped the sunlight and surface shadows first and overlaid them with the indicated muscles, but this seemed to turn the model inside out. Then only yesterday he had seen that the whole thing must be painted in together, laid on in broad brushfuls of thin paint, so that the luminousness and solidity should both be preserved, and this method was proving excitingly satisfactory. Often during this last week he had almost despaired of accomplishing that which he had set himself to do, but stronger than his despair was his absolute determination to record what he saw, not only what he knew to be there. It was impossible for his brother to hold this tiring pose for more than a couple of minutes, and often it was difficult to get its resumption accurately. But this morning Reggie seemed to fall or rather stretch himself into the correct position without effort, and Charles on his side knew that to-day he had the clear-seeing eye and the clever co-ordinating hand. For an hour of pose and rest Reggie stood there, and then Charles stepped a few yards away from his canvas, and stood a moment biting the end of his brush, and frowning as he looked from model to picture and back again. Then the frown cleared.

"Thanks most awfully, Reggie," he said. "It's done: good or bad, it's done."

Reggie gave a great shout, and disappeared altogether in the pool.

Charles made breakfast ready according to agreement, and the two sat for a while afterwards in the stupefaction of out-door content.

"This week has gone on wings," said Reggie, "and it's an awful melancholy thing to think that this is my last day here. But it's been a beauty of a week, I'm no end grateful to you for bringing me."

Reggie had the caressing moods of a very young thing. As he spoke he left his seat and established himself on the ground leaning back against his brother's knees and anchoring himself with a hand passed round his leg.

"I should have had to stew in Sidney Street for my week of holiday," he went on, "if it hadn't been for you. It was ripping of you to let me come."

"It's I who score," said Charles. "You've earned your keep all right. I should have had to hire a model otherwise, or have done without one."

"Oh, well, then, we both score."

Reggie threw away the end of his cigarette and abstracted Charles' case from his pocket.

"I must go up to town this afternoon," he said, "for Thistleton's Gallery opens again to-morrow morning. And there I shall sit, all July, at the receipt of custom and sell catalogues and make the turn-stile click and acknowledge receipts ... oh, a dog's life. Jove, what a lot of money some of those fellows have! There was an American who came in last week and went around the gallery with a great fat white man called Craddock who often comes and shows people round. I rather think he is Thistleton, and owns the place. I say, Charles – "

Reggie broke off suddenly.

"Why, I believe it was he who was in the punt last night," he said, "and was standing on the lawn with that girl you sang at – "

"Didn't notice him particularly," said Charles.

"No, you were noticing somebody else particularly. But I feel sure it was he. As I say, he was taking an American round last week, who bought a couple of little Dutch pictures. He stopped at my desk on the way out and borrowed my pen and wrote a cheque for £5000 right straight off, without coughing. I remember he said he was going to post-date it. But he didn't tip me."

"I don't quite know what this is all about," remarked Charles.

"Nor do I. I hoped it was just agreeable conversation. Don't you find it so? But I bet you what you like that the fat white man in the punt was Craddock."

Reggie lay further back against his brother's legs.

"I see a great tragedy ahead," he said, "with inquests and executions. Craddock is about to marry the girl of the punt, and Charles will cut his throat, and – "

"Whose throat?" asked Charles.

"His own or Craddock's; perhaps Craddock's first and his own afterwards. Then there will be a sensational trial, and I can't bother to make up any more. Are you going to paint all the morning, Charles?"

"No, none of it. It's enough for to-day to have finished you. I shall stop down here a day or two more and do another sketch after you have gone. I'm at your disposal this morning."

"Then let us do nothing for a long time, and then bathe for a long time, and then do both all over again. Lord, I wish I was an artist like you, instead of a doorkeeper, to stop about all day in delicious places, and do exactly what you like best in the world, which is to paint."

"It would make it completer if anybody wanted best in the world to buy what I had painted," remarked Charles.

"But you sold two water colours the other day for three pounds each," remarked the consolatory Reggie. "That's as much as I earn in a month."

"It might happen oftener," said Charles. "By the way, I heard from Mother last night."

"A nice woman," said Reggie.

"Quite. She sent me another sovereign in case funds had run low. When you get back you will find she has been living on tea and toast because she didn't feel hungry."

Reggie gave a huge sigh.

"I wish a man might marry his mother," he observed. "I should certainly marry her and we would ask you and the punt-girl to stay with us."

"Very kind," said Charles.

These two young men who were enjoying so open-aired a week of June by the Thames-side were the only children of the widow whom they kindly agreed to regard as a "nice woman." They had been brought up in easy and well-to-do circumstances, and educated at public schools, until the suicide of their father a little more than a year ago had disclosed a state of affairs that was as appalling as it was totally unexpected. He was a jobber on the stock-exchange and partner in a firm of high repute, but he had been privately indulging in a course of the wildest gambling, and he could not face the exposure which he knew could no longer be avoided. The sale of the pleasant country home at Walton Heath, and the disposal of all that could be converted into cash had been barely sufficient to make an honourable settlement of his unimagined debts. Neither his wife nor either of the boys had ever dreamed of the possibility of such a situation: never had it appeared that he had had the slightest anxiety with regard to money. His self-control had been perfect until, as with the breaking of some dam, it had given way altogether in ruin and destruction. Till that very moment he had been the gayest and youngest of that eager little family party, all of whom brought an extraordinary lightness and zest to the conduct of their unclouded lives. Charles had already left school for a three years when

the stroke fell, and was studying in a famous *atelier* in Paris, while Reggie, still at Marlborough, was devoting as much time as he could reasonably be expected to spare from athletic exercises to the acquiring of foreign tongues with a view to the diplomatic service. They had both been instantly sent for by their mother, who met his death with a fortitude that never wavered. It was not long that they had to wait for the explanation of the utterly unlooked-for catastrophe, for a very short examination of his private papers showed the extent of his defaulting and the imminence of the crash. Willingly, had it been possible, would she have kept from her sons the knowledge that he had killed himself, bearing alone the unshared secret, but an explanation of accident was impossible. Equally impossible was it to conceal the miserable cause of it.

It was on the evening of Charles' return from Paris, as they sat in the still house that till to-day had always rung with jollity, while heathery sweetness and the resinous odour of pines came in at the open windows, that she told them everything, quite shortly, and when that was done and they were still half stunned with the sudden horror that had blackened life, she rallied her own courage by awakening theirs.

"You know it all, my darlings," she said, "and now whenever you think of it, and for a long time it will always be in your thoughts, you must think of it all as some dreadful mistake that dear Dad made, something he never meant at all. He got his troubles muddled up in his head till he didn't know what he was doing. He felt he couldn't bear it, just as sometimes he used to call out when we were playing some silly game like Animal Grab 'I can't bear it: I can't bear it.' Oh, Charles, my darling, don't cry so awfully. We've got to go straight ahead again, with all our courage undismayed, and show that we can face anything that God chooses to send us."

She waited a little, comforting now one and now the other.

"It was all a mistake," she went on, "and we must never allow ourselves to think that it was the dear Dad we knew who did it. He wasn't himself: trouble had made him forget himself and all of us just for a moment. We will think about that moment as little as we can, and then only as a mistake, but we will think constantly and lovingly of the dear Dad we have known all these years, who was so loving and tender to all three of us, and whom we knew as so gay and light-hearted. We will have him constantly in our thoughts like that, this and all the loving-kindness of the years in which we laughed and loved together. And if we can't help, as we shan't be able to do, thinking with a sort of wondering despair of that blunder, that mistake, we must remember that, somehow or other, though we can't explain how, it is and was even then in the hands of God."

It had been no vague piety or bloodless resignation that had inspired her then, nor in the year that followed, and it had required a very full measure of the essential spirit of youth, which never sits down with folded hands, but despises resignation as it despises any other sort of inaction, to bring them all to the point where they stood to-day. Whether the boys helped their mother most, or she them, is one of those problems of psychological proportions into which it is unnecessary to enquire, since each had been throughout the year, essential to the others. For if there had been no jolly boys coming home at evening to Mrs. Lathom in their lodgings in the meagre gentility of Sidney Street, she could no more have got through her industrious day with hope never quenched in her heart than could they if there had been no mother waiting to welcome them. She without waiting a day after they moved to London invested a few pounds of their exiguous capital in buying a typewriting machine, and before long, by dint of unremitting work was earning a wage sufficient, with Reggie's office salary, to keep the three of them in independence and adequate comfort, as well as to pay for a slip of a dilapidated studio in a neighbouring street, where Charles toiled with all the fire of his young heart and swiftly-growing skill of hand at his interrupted studies.

It was for him, of all the three, that life was most difficult since he was an expense only to the others and it required all the young man's courage to persevere in work which at present brought in almost nothing. But his mother's courage reinforced his: while it was possible for him to continue working, it would be a cowardly surrender to give up tending the ripening fruit of his years in Paris,

and let the tree wither, and turn his brushes, so to speak, into pens, and his palette into an office stool. Besides, he had within him, lying secret and shy but vitally alive, the unalterable conviction of the true artist that his work was ordained to be art, and that where his heart was there would sufficient treasure be found also. But it was hard for him, even with the endorsing sincerity of his mother's encouragement, to continue being the drone of the hive so far as actual earning was concerned, and it had demanded the utmost he had of faith in himself and love for his art to continue working with that ecstasy of toil that art demands at all that which his education needed, and not to grudge days and weeks spent in work as profitless from the earning point of view as he believed it to be profitable in his own artistic equipment. Drawing had always been his weak point, and hour after interminable hour from casts or from the skeleton, properties saved from the lavish Paris days, he would patiently copy the framework of bones and patiently clothe them in their appropriate muscles and sinews. As must always happen, long weeks of work went by without progress as noticed by himself, until once and once again he found himself standing on firm ground instead of floundering through bogs and quick-sands which endlessly engulfed his charcoal and his hours, and knew that certain haltings and uncertainties of line troubled him no longer. But he made no pause for self-congratulation but continued with that mingling of fire and unremitting patience which is characteristic of the true and inspired learner. Colour and the whole complex conception of values, which go to make up the single picture, instead of a collection, however well rendered, of different objects was naturally his: he had by instinct that embracing vision that takes in the subject as a whole.

The heat of the morning disposed to quiescence, and the two boys with the spice of meadow-sweet and loosestrife round them, and the coolness of the running water, drowsily booming, to temper the growing swelter of the day, talked lazily and desultorily, concerned with these things, for a long time after breakfast was over. But they were vividly concerned with them no more: to each the opening pageant of life was more engrossing than the tragedy of the past, being young they looked forward, where the middle-aged would have dwelt with the present, and the old have mumbled and starved with the past. But to them it was but dawn, and the promise of day was the insistent thing, and there was no temptation to dwell in ruins, and conjure back the night. But before long the itch for activity, in spite of their resolve of a lazy morning, possessed each, and Reggie fervidly washed up the used crockery of breakfast, while Charles went up the few yards of path that lay between the tent and the side of the weir, to behold again the picture he had left standing on its easel. In his heart he knew it was finished, but in the eagerness of his youth he almost looked forward to some further brushful of inspiration. He would not touch what he knew was good: he hoped only to find something that could be touched with advantage.

He turned a sharp corner, where willows screened the weir; his picture was planted within a dozen yards of him. But between him and his picture was planted a big white-faced man who was regarding it so intently that he did not hear the swish of the parted willows. It was not till Charles was at his elbow that Craddock turned and saw him.

And he put into his manner the deference which he reserved for duchesses and talent.

"I have come to your private view," he said, "without being asked, and it was very impertinent of me. But really this is my second visit. I had my first private view yesterday, when I looked at your picture from a punt in which I happened to be. I had just a couple of glimpses at your work before this. You have been very fortunate in your inspiration since then. The Muse paid you a good visit this morning."

Charles said nothing, but his eyes questioned this intruder, giving him a tentative welcome. But before the pause was at all prolonged the tentative welcome had been changed into a wondering and tremulous expectancy. Were there fairies still by the Thames-side? Was this fat white man to prove a fairy?

"You have painted an admirable picture," continued the possible fairy, "and the handling of the most difficult part of all – of course you know I mean the lights and shadows on that delightful

figure – is masterly. Of course there are faults, plenty of them, but you can see, and you can draw, and you can paint."

Craddock saw Charles' lip quiver, and heard that it cost him an effort to command his voice.

"Not really?" he stammered.

"Unless I am much mistaken, and it has been the business of my life to seek out those who can see and draw and paint. Now I don't know your name, and assuredly I have never seen your work before, and since it is my business also to know the names and the works of all young men who can paint, I imagine that you have your artistic début, so to speak, still in front of you. But I shall be exceedingly grateful to you if you will sell me your picture, straight away, here and now. And if you won't let me have it for fifty pounds, I shall have to offer you sixty."

Charles looked vaguely round, first at Craddock then at his picture, then at the spouting weir, almost expecting to see them melt, as is the manner of dreams, into some other farrago as fantastical as this, or dissolve altogether into a waking reality.

"Do you really mean you will give me fifty pounds for it," he asked.

"No: I will give you sixty. But don't touch it again. Take my word for it that it is finished. Or did you know that already?"

"Oh, yes," said the boy. "I finished it an hour ago. But I came back to make sure."

"Well, then, when you leave your encampment here, will you please send it to me at this address? That is to say, if I am to have the privilege of purchasing it."

This repetition gave reality to the interview: people in dreams were not so persistent, and Charles gave a little joyous laugh, as Craddock took a card out of his pocket and gave it to him.

"Or were you thinking of exhibiting it?" he asked.

"I was meaning to have a try with it at the autumn Exhibition of the 'Artists and Etchers,'" said Charles.

"I have no objection to that, provided you will let me have a little talk with you first, and put certain proposals before you."

He looked at the picture again, and saw more surely than ever its admirable quality. It had unity: it was a picture of a boy just about to plunge into a sunlit pool, not a boy, and a pool, and some sunlight, a mere pictorial map, or painted enumeration of objects. It was all tingling with freshness and vitality and the rapture of early achievement: no artist, however skilled, if he had outgrown his youthful enthusiasm could have done it like that, though he would easily have produced a work more technically faultless. Eagerness, though wonderfully controlled, burned in it; the joy of life shouted from it. And when he looked from it to the tall shy boy whose grey eyes had seen that, whose long fingers had handled the brushes that recorded it, he felt sure he would not go far wrong in his own interests in making a proposal to him that would seem to him fantastical in its encouraging generosity. Indeed he felt that there was no element of chance in the matter, for there could be no doubt about this young man's temperament, which lies at the bottom of all artistic achievement, and in this case was so clearly to be read in those eager eyes and sensitive mouth. Naturally he had a tremendous lot to learn, but a temperament so full of ardent life and romantic perception as that which had inspired this idyll of youth and sunshine and outpouring waters would never rest from the realization of its dreams and visions.

He looked at his watch and found he had still half an hour before he need to go to the station.

"Can you give me a few minutes of your time now?" he said.

"Of course. I will just tell my brother that I can't come with him at once. We were going on the river."

"Do. Tell him to come back for you in half-an-hour. That is he, I suppose, on the header-board."

Charles went quickly down the little path to the tent.

"O, Reggie," he said. "The fat white man has come and bought my picture. Absolutely bought it. It's real: I'm just beginning to believe it."

Reggie stared for a moment. Then, for he had a poor opinion of his brother's business capacities, "How much?" he demanded.

"Sixty pounds. Not shillings, pounds. And he wants to talk to me now, so come back for me in half-an-hour. He says I can paint, and somehow I think he knows."

"Bless his fat face," said Reggie. "We'll let him have it at his own price. Anything for the model? I think the model deserves something."

"He shall get it," said Charles.

Reggie caught hold of his brother by the shoulders, and danced him round in three wild capering circles.

Arthur Craddock had sat himself down on the steps that led to the header-board waiting for Charles' return. He had turned the picture round, so that he saw it in a less perplexing light, and found that he had no need to reconsider his previous conclusions about it. It was brimful of lusty talent, and there seemed to him to be a hint of something more transcendent than talent. There was a really original note in it: it had a style of its own, not a style of others, and though he felt sure that the artist must have studied at Bonnat's in Paris, there was something about the drawing of it which had never been taught in that admirable atelier. And the artist was so young: there was no telling at what he might not arrive. Craddock had a true reverence for genius, and he suspected genius here. He also had a very keen appreciation of advantageous financial transactions, which he expected might be gratified before long. For both these reasons he awaited Charles' return with impatience. He was prepared to make his proposal to him at once, if necessary, but he felt he would prefer to see more of his work first.

Charles did not tax his patience long: he came running back.

"Let us begin at the beginning, like the catechism," said Craddock. "What is your name?"

"Charles Lathom."

"And mine is Arthur Craddock. So here we are."

Craddock was capable of considerable charm of manner and a disarming frankness, and already Charles felt disposed both to like and trust him.

"Your work, such as I have seen of it," Craddock went on, "interests me immensely. Also it makes me feel a hundred years old, which is not in itself pleasant, but I bear no grudge, for the means" – and he pointed at the picture, "excuse the effect. Now, my dear Lathom, be kind and answer me a few questions. You studied with Bonnat, did you not?"

"Yes, for two years."

"Only that? You used your time well. But who taught you drawing?"

Charles looked at him with a charmingly youthful modesty and candour.

"Nobody," he said. "I couldn't draw at all when I left Bonnat's. Of course I don't mean that I can draw now. But I worked very hard by myself for the last year. I felt I had to learn drawing for myself: at least Bonnat couldn't teach me."

"And have you copied much?"

"I copy in the National Gallery. I try to copy the English masters."

"There is no better practice, and you will do well to keep it up, provided you do plenty of original work too. But of course you can't help doing that. I should like to see some of your copies, unless you have sold them."

Charles laughed.

"Not I, worse luck," he said. "Indeed, I have only done bits of pictures. You see –"

He was warming to his confession: the artist within him bubbled irrepressibly in the presence of this man who seemed to understand him so well, and to invite his confidence.

"You see, I didn't care so much about copying entire pictures," he said. "It wasn't Reynolds' grouping – is that fearfully conceited? – that I wanted to learn and to understand, but his drawing, ears, noses, hands – I find I can manage the composition of my picture in a way that seems to me

more or less right, and can see the values, but the drawing: that was what I wanted to get. And it has improved. It was perfectly rotten a year ago."

A further idea lit its lamp in Craddock's quick brain.

"You shall show me some of your studies," he said. "And should you care to copy a Reynolds, I feel sure I can get you a good commission, if your copies are anything like as good as your original work. Do tell me anything more about yourself, that you feel disposed to."

Charles brushed his hair back off his forehead. Craddock's manner was so supremely successful with him that he did not know that it was manner at all. He felt he could tell him anything: he trusted him completely.

"I studied with Bonnat for two years," he said, "and then there came a crash. My father died, and we were left extremely poor; in fact, we were left penniless. Perhaps you remember. My mother earns money, so does Reggie, my brother. But for this last year, you see, it is I whom they have been supporting. They wanted me to go on working, and not mind about that. So I worked on: I have been very industrious I think, but till now, till this minute, I haven't earned more than a pound or two. That's why – "

Charles had to pause a moment. The reality and significance of what was happening almost overwhelmed him. Sixty pounds meant a tremendous lot to him, but the meaning of it, that of which it was the symbol meant so infinitely more.

"That's why I could hardly believe at first that you wanted to buy my picture," he said. "It seemed too big a thing to happen. It's not only the fact of sixty pounds, it's your belief that my picture is worth it, that I can paint. But if nobody ever wanted to buy or saw any merit in what I did, I don't believe I could help going on working."

He was sitting on the ground just below the steps which Craddock occupied, and he felt a kind hand on his shoulder, as if to calm and fortify his voice which he knew was rather unsteady.

"So I guessed," said Craddock, "but it is just as pleasant to find that somebody does believe in you, and I assure you that I am only the first of many who will. Now about our arrangements – I will give you ten pounds at once to show you I am in earnest about buying your picture – "

"O, good Lord, no," interrupted Charles.

"I should prefer it, and I will send you the balance from town. Now will you come up there to-morrow and show me what you call your bits of things? Show me them the day after to-morrow, and shall we say ten in the morning? You must give me the address of your studio and I will come there. Bring up your picture with you, but get some boy from the village to look after your tent and belongings for a night or two, if you prefer this to rooms. Very likely you will want to occupy it again. The Reynolds of which I spoke is in a house near."

Craddock got up and pulled out a Russia-leather pocketbook.

"Here is my earnest money," he said. "Your studio address? Thanks."

Charles' heart was so full that it seemed to choke his brain and his power of utterance. The first ineffable moment of recognition, dear even to the most self-reliant of artists, had come to him, and until then he had not known how nearly he had despaired of its advent. He held out his hand, and smiled and shook his head.

"It's no use my trying to thank you," he said, "for there are no words that are any use. But I expect you know."

As has been said, Arthur Craddock had a profound reverence for talent quite apart from his keen pleasure in advantageous bargains, and his answer, dictated by that was quite sincere.

"The thanks must pass from me to you," he said. "People like myself who are unable to create, find their rewards in being able to appreciate the work of those like yourself. Pray do not think of me as a patron: I am a customer, but I hope I may prove to you that I am a good one. Ten o'clock, then, the day after to-morrow."

Craddock had the invaluable mental gift of attending with a thoroughness hermetically sealed from all other distractions to the business on hand. Nor did he let his mind dribble its force into other channels, when he wanted the whole of it to gush from one nozzle, and in this interview with Charles Lathom he had summoned his whole energy, though the expression of it was very quiet, to winning the boy's confidence, and making himself appear as a discerning and generous appreciator. It would have seemed to him a very poor policy to obtain this picture, as he could no doubt have done, for a quarter of the price he had offered for it, while on the other hand, it was unnecessary to offer twice that price (which he would willingly have done) since he could make the impression that was needful for his future scheme, at the lower figure. Economy was an excellent thing, but there was no mistake more gross than to economize at the wrong time. He was satisfied as to this, and now he dismissed the subject of Charles and his picture quite completely, and turned his whole thoughts elsewhere.

There were several directions in which it might profitably have turned; he turned it to one in which any possible profit was remote. That morning, before he made this visit to Charles, Craddock had proposed to Joyce, who had refused him. He had not taken, and did not now take her refusal as final, and told her so, but it had considerably surprised him. He knew well how restricted a life she led at home, how subjected she was to her father's peevish caprices and complaints, how cut off she was from the general diversions of life, and this, added to her father's assurance that he "pleased her" was sufficient to make him frankly astonished at her rejection of him, and her refusal to walk through the door which he held open for her, and which provided so easy an escape from all these disabilities. He had put before her, though not pompously, these advantages, he had mentioned that her father endorsed his application, he had not omitted to lay stress on his devotion to her, and had ascertained that there was no rival in the field of her maidenly preference. It is true that he was not in love with her, but, acute man though he was in all that concerned the head, it never entered into his mind, even now, as he drove to the station, and thought intently about the subject, that this omission could have had anything to do with his ill-success. It is quite doubtful whether, even if he had been desperately in love with her, Joyce would conceivably have given any different answer, but, as it was, the omission was so fatal to her instinct, that there could not be a moment's struggle or debate for her. She was not even sorry for him, for clearly there was nothing real to be sorry for. Otherwise, she would have sincerely regretted her inability to accept him, for, in spite of a certain physical distaste which she felt for him, she liked him, and admired his quickness and cleverness. Had her father told her that Craddock was going to live with him, she would have hailed him with a genuine welcome. But quite apart from her feeling towards him, there was the insuperable barrier of his want of feeling towards her. Of that barrier, of the possibility of her knowing it, he, with all his cleverness, had no idea. But to Joyce the whole matter was abundantly evident; she knew he did not even love her, and his love for her was the only thing that could have made her acceptance of him ever so faintly possible. Without that all other reasons for marrying him were fly-blown; no debate, no balancings were conceivable. The scale dented the beam with its unchecked kick.

He thought over this ill-success, guessed without getting within miles of the truth at the primary reason for it, as he drove through the white sunshine from his interview with the astounded and grateful Charles, and almost immediately became aware that in the last hour, his feelings for Joyce had undergone a curious intensification. Inspired, as he had been all his life by desires that were entirely material, he had been used, by the aid of his clever brain, to compass and possess them. Often, of course, he had not been able for the mere wanting, to obtain the coveted object, and hitherto, it had almost invariably happened that this temporary check stirred him up to such further efforts as were necessary. A wish denied him hitherto, had connoted a wish intensified, and since there is a great deal of truth latent in the commonplace that to want a thing enough always earns the appropriate reward of desire, he had not often fainted or failed before reaching his goal. Even now, though up till now his desire for Joyce had been scarcely more than a wish, it seemed to him different from all other wishes; it was becoming a desire as simple and primal as hunger for food or sleep... Some

internal need dictated it. This was disturbing, and since he had other immediate work on hand, he turned his attention to a typewritten manuscript, of which he had read part, last night; he proposed to finish it in the train.

Craddock, as has been said, had a mind profoundly critical and appreciative: he had also quite distinct and segregate, an astonishing *flair* for perceiving what the public would appreciate. Often he bought pictures which from an artistic point of view he thought frankly contemptible because he saw signs so subtle that they were instinctively perceived rather than reasoned – that the public was going to see something in either an old outworn mode, or in some new and abominable trickery. He then transferred his purchases to Thistleton's Gallery, and gladly parted with them on advantageous terms. But this *flair* of his was by no means confined to mere pictorial representations, and he was always glad to read a novel or a play in manuscript, with a view to purchasing it himself, and disposing of his acquired rights to publisher or playwright. Living as he publicly did in the centre of things, an assiduous diner out and frequenter of fashionable stair-cases, he yet had a quiet and secret life of his own as distinct from the other as are the lives of inhabitants in adjoining houses, whose circle of friends are as diverse as bishops from ballet-dancers. He preferred to deal in the work of men who were young or unknown, and at present had not been able to get producers for their possible masterpieces. He was thus often able by liberal offers to secure an option of purchase (at a specified figure) over the output of their next few years. Often to the sick-heartedness of their deferred hopes, such prospects seemed dictated by a princely liberality, and they were gladly accepted. Scores of such plays he read and found wanting, but every now and then he came across something which with judicious handling and backed by the undoubted influence he had with the public through the press, he felt sure he could waft into desirable havens. Only this morning by the weir-side he had found a gem of very pure ray, which he believed to be easily obtainable, and now as he read this manuscript in the train, he fancied that his jewel-box need not be locked up again yet. The public he thought to be tired of problem-dramas: they liked their thinking to be peptonized for them, and presented in a soft digestible form. Just at present, too, they had no use for high romance on the one hand, or, on the other, subtle situations and delicate unravellings. They wanted to be shown the sort of thing, that, with a little laughter and no tears, might suitably happen to perfectly commonplace, undistinguished (though not indistinguishable) persons, and in this comedy of suburban villadom, with curates and stockbrokers and churchwardens behaving naturally and about as humorously as they might be expected to behave without straining themselves, he felt sure that he held in his hand a potential success on a large scale.

The author was young and desperately poor: he had already had a play on the boards at the first night of which Arthur Craddock had been present, which had scored as complete a failure as could possibly have been desired to produce suitable humility in a young man. But Craddock, who always thought for himself instead of accepting the opinions of others, had seen what good writing there was in it, how curiously deft was the handling of the material, and knew that the failure was largely due to the choice of subject, though ten years ago it would probably have been welcomed as vigorously as it was now condemned. It was an excellent play of ten years ago, or perhaps ten years to come, with its lurid story too difficult for the indolent theatre-goer of this particular year to grasp, and its climax of inextricable misery. He had therefore immediately written to Frank Armstrong, the author, and at an ensuing interview told him what, in his opinion, were the lines on which to build a popular success. Then, guessing, or, rather knowing, that Armstrong must have attempted drama many times before he had produced so mature a piece of work as the unfortunate "Lane Without a Turning," he said:

"I daresay you have something in your desk at home, rather like what I have been sketching to you, which you have very likely failed to get produced before now. Send it to me, and let me read it."

It was this play "Easter-Eggs" which Craddock finished as the train slowed down into Paddington Station. It could not be described as so fine a play as that which had achieved so complete a failure, but it had all that the other lacked in popular and effective sentiment. Even to a man of

Craddock's experience in the want of discernment in theatrical managers, it was quite astounding that it had ever been refused, but he could guess why this had been its fate. For there was no "star-part" in it; there was no character, overwhelmingly conspicuous, who could dominate the whole play and turn it into a "one-man" show. The success of it must depend on level competent acting, without limelight and slow music. It was a domestic drama without villain or hero or dominating personality, and when he again read over the list of acting managers to whom Frank Armstrong had submitted it, he saw how absurd it was to suppose that Tranby or Akroyd or Miss Loughton could ever have considered its production. But he saw also how a company of perfectly-unknown artists could admirably present it, with a great saving of salaries. It needed moderate talent evenly distributed, and one part mishandled would wreck it as surely as would some ranting actor-manager who tried to force a dominant personality into the play, and only succeeded in upsetting the whole careful balance of it. Even as Craddock drove back to his sumptuous and airless flat in Berkeley Square he jotted down a half-dozen names of those who filled minor parts in star-plays quite excellently. He wanted them without the stars.

And then quite suddenly, his mind, usually so obedient, bolted, and proceeded at top-speed in quite another direction. Without intention, he found himself wondering what Joyce was doing, whether she would have told her father about his proposal, or confided in that astutest of grandmothers, whether she was in the punt with panting dogs, or still troubled with the undoubted indisposition of Buz, who had not been at all well, so she had told him, this last day or two. Her life seemed to him a deplorable waste of heavenly maidenhood, partly owing to a selfish father, partly, now at least, because she had not consented to waste it no longer. Youth lasted so short a time and its possessors so often squandered it on things that profited not, ailing dogs, for instance, and swans' nests among the reeds.

Then he caught sight of his own large face in the mirror of his motor, and felt terribly old. He, too, had squandered his youth in the amassing of knowledge, in all that could have been acquired when the leap of the blood thrilled less imperatively, in the passion devoted to passionless things, in the mere acquisition of wealth, in the formation of his unerring taste and acumen. But he knew that his blood had tuned itself to a brisker and more virile pulse, since Joyce had shaken her head and smiled, and been a little troubled. Or was it over the indisposition of Buz that she was troubled?

Then, arriving at his flat, he became his own man again, and cordially telephoned to Frank Armstrong to have lunch with him.

CHAPTER III

An hour later Frank Armstrong was sitting opposite Craddock eating lunch with the steadfast and business-like air of a man who was not only hungry now, but knew from long experience that it was prudent to eat whenever edibles could be had for nothing. Some minutes before Craddock had suggested a slice of cold meat to give solidity to the very light repast that was so suitable to the heat of the day, and since then Armstrong had been consuming ham and firm pieces of bread without pause or speech. But nobody was less greedy than he; only, for years of his life he had been among the habitually hungry. In appearance he was rugged and potentially fierce: a great shock of black hair crowned a forehead that projected like a pent-house over deep-set angry eyes, and it might be guessed that he was a person both easy and awkward to quarrel with, for his expression was suspicious and resentful, as of some wild beast, accustomed to ill-usage, but whom ill-usage had altogether failed in taming. But though this ugliness of expression was certainly the predominant characteristic of that strong distrustful face, a less casual observer might easily form the conclusion that there were better things below, a certain eagerness, a certain patience, a certain sensibility.

He looked up at Craddock after a while, with a queer crooked smile on his large mouth, not without charm.

"I will now cease being a pig," he said. "But when one is really hungry one can't think about anything else. It is no more hoggish, really, than the longing for sleep if you haven't slept for nights, or for water when one is thirsty. I had no breakfast this morning. Now what have you got to talk to me about?"

Craddock was a strong believer in the emollient effects of food, and had determined to talk no business till his client was at ease in a chair with tobacco and quiescent influences.

"Ah, no breakfast!" he said. "I myself find that I work best before I eat."

Frank Armstrong laughed.

"I don't," he said. "I work best after a large meal. No: I did not have breakfast, because it would have been highly inconvenient to pay for it. There are such people, you know. I have often been one of them."

Arthur Craddock found this peremptory young savage slightly alarming. For himself he demanded that social intercourse should be conducted in a sort of atmosphere of politeness, of manners. Just as in landscape-painting you had to have atmosphere, else the effect was of cast-iron, so in dealings with your fellow-men. There should be no such things as edges, particularly raw ones. He thought he had seldom seen anybody so unatmospheric.

"My dear fellow," he said. "Do you mean that you have been actually in want of money to pay for food? Why did you not tell me? You knew what an interest I took in you and your work."

Frank looked at him quite unatmospherically.

"But why should my having breakfast matter to you?" he said. "You wanted my work, if you thought it good: if not, I was no more to you than all the rest of the brutes who go without breakfast. Now about the play. At least, I don't suppose you asked me to lunch in order to talk about breakfast. I quite expect you to tell me it's twaddle, indeed, I know it is. But does it by any chance seem to you remunerative twaddle?"

Craddock really suffered in this want of atmosphere. He gasped, mentally speaking, like an unaccustomed aeronaut in rarefied air.

"Ah, I can't agree with you that it is twaddle," he said. "The plot no doubt is slender, but the dialogue is excellent, and you show considerable precision and fineness of line in the character-drawing."

"But what characters?" said the candid author. "The curate, the housemaid, the churchwarden. Lord, what people, without a shred of life or force in them. But it answered your description of what theatre-goers liked. I wrote it last year, in a reaction after the 'Lane without a Turning.'"

"Ah, was that it?" said Craddock. "It puzzled me to know how a boy like you – you are a boy, my dear fellow – could possibly write anything so bitter and hopeless as that, and something so quietly genial as 'Easter Eggs.'"

"Easily enough. I myself wrote the one: it was me, and as I found out, nobody liked it. 'Easter Eggs' is merely my observation of a quantity of blameless chattering people. I lived in Surbiton when I was quite a boy. They were rather like that: there were teaparties and sewing-societies to relieve distress among the poor. Packets of cross-overs used to be sent to Cancer Hospitals. Let's get back to the subject. Remunerative or not?"

"Without doubt remunerative," agreed Craddock again gasping.

"But I have given three of our leading actors the opportunity of remunerating themselves and me, and they won't touch it. Are their souls above remuneration, and do they only want topping high art?"

Arthur Craddock did not see his way to telling Armstrong that he had sent his play to exactly those managers who would be quite certain to refuse it, because that was information which he had excellent reason, if he was to conclude an advantageous bargain, for keeping to himself.

"Nevertheless, I am right about your play," he said, "and Tranby and Akroyd are wrong."

Frank shrugged his shoulders.

"So you tell me," he observed.

"Yes, and I am willing to back my opinion. I will here and now buy this play from you and pay for it at a figure which you will not consider ungenerous, considering it is a pure speculation on my part. But there are certain conditions."

Frank Armstrong pulled his chair up closer to the table, and put his elbows on it. Craddock could see that his fingers were trembling.

"Name your conditions, if you will be so good," he said. "Perhaps you would also tell me more about the not ungenerous figure."

Craddock held up a white plump hand of deprecation. He positively could not get on without manners and life's little insincerities. As this young man seemed to have none of them, he had to supply sufficient for two. He was glad to observe that signal of nervousness on Armstrong's part: it argued well for the acceptance of his bargain.

"You are so direct, my dear fellow," he said. "You demand a 'yes' or a 'no' like a cross-examining counsel. You must permit me to explain the situation. I take a great interest in your work and in you, and I am willing to run a considerable risk in order to give your work a chance of being fairly judged and appreciated. Now there is nothing more difficult to gauge than the likings of the public, and while I tell you that your play will be without doubt remunerative, I may be hopelessly in error. But I see in it certain qualities which I think will attract, though in your previous play, which, frankly, I think a finer piece of work than this, the public was merely repelled. But here –"

Armstrong's elbow gave a jerk that was quite involuntary.

"Shall we come to the point?" he said. "Of course this is all very gratifying, but we can talk about the play's merits afterwards. How much do you offer me for 'Easter Eggs' and on what conditions?"

Craddock drummed with his plump fingers on the table. Looking across at the strong rough face opposite him he could see suspense and anxiety very clearly written there. He felt a rather nasty pleasure in that: it was like poking up some fierce animal with a stick, where there are bars between which prevent its retaliating violence. But perhaps it would be kinder to put it out of its suspense, for Armstrong wanted to know this more than he had wanted lunch even.

"I offer you £500 down for all rights of your play," he said, "on conditions that you let me have three more of your plays within the next three years at the same price, should I choose to buy them."

Armstrong did not take his eyes off him, nor did the stringency of their gaze relax.

"Did you say £500?" he asked in an odd squeaky little voice.

"I did."

Then the tension relaxed. The young man got up and rubbed the backs of his hands across his eyes.

"If I'm asleep," he said, "I hope I shan't wake for a long time. It's deuced pleasant. I don't quite know what five hundred pounds mean – I can't see to the end of them. I thought perhaps you were going to offer me £50. I should certainly have accepted it. Why didn't you?"

This was a good opportunity for Craddock.

"Because I do not happen to be a sweater," he said, "and because like an honest man I prefer paying a fair price for good work."

Armstrong gave a great shout of laughter.

"And because there isn't much difference to you between fifty pounds and five hundred," he said.

He paused.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I had no business to say that. But I don't understand your offer. By the way, of course I accept it."

Craddock had tried to look hurt when this rather ruthless suggestion as to the reason for his generosity was made, but he did not feel within himself that his attempt was very successful, and was glad to look benign again when Frank Armstrong apologised.

The tremulousness of his hands had ceased, and he looked straight at his benefactor with his distrustful gaze. Then once more the crooked rather charming smile came on his mouth.

"Personally, I am sure you rather detest me," he said, "so I suppose it seems to you worth while financially to run this risk with your money. So, though I'm bewildered, I tell you frankly, with the prospect of five hundred pounds, I'm not grateful to you. I wish I was. Of course, if 'Easter Eggs' makes anything of a hit, you will do pretty well, and I shall be a popular playwright –"

He broke off a moment, and pushed back his hair.

"Ah, I see: that's where you come in," he said. "You have an option to buy three more plays by a popular playwright at the same price. Again if any of the three new ones makes a success, you won't do very badly."

Craddock went on the whisker-hunt for a moment.

"And if 'Easter Eggs' is put on, and fails, as your other play did," he observed, "shall I not be considerably out of pocket? And another failure would not encourage me to exercise my option over any future work of yours. However, let it be me this time who asks you to come to the point. Do you accept my offer or not? I may mention that I shall not renew it. I cannot waste my time over arrangements that come to nothing."

Armstrong nodded at him with comparative friendliness.

"Good Lord, yes. I accept it," he said. "I told you I should have accepted £50."

Craddock got up.

"Then if you have finished your lunch, we might draw up an agreement over our cigarettes."

"Certainly. I daresay you will let me have a cigar, too. And when I've signed, or whatever I have to do, will you give me a cheque straight off? I shall have a banking account, I suppose, and I shan't be hungry again for ever, as far as I can see. By George, I ought to be grateful to you. But I think the sort of experience I've been through don't give a fellow much practice in gratitude. Gratitude is an acquired virtue. It is the prosperous who mainly acquire it."

Craddock patted him on the shoulder.

"My dear fellow, you may leave the cynicism of the Lane that had no Turning behind you," he said.

Armstrong suddenly drew up his shirt-cuff and showed a long scar healed years ago which ran nearly up to his elbow.

"That's where my father threw a knife at me once," he said. "It was a bad shot, for he threw it at my head. It's healed, you might think: it looks healed. It bleeds inside, though."

This was a savage young beast, it seemed, that Craddock had got hold of, one who had been set in slippery places, that sloped hell-wards. Craddock had known some who had learned patience from their sojournings in such resorts, he had known others who had simply been broken by it, others again, and of those possibly the joyful and attractive Charles Lathom was one, who seemed to have taken no colour from their surroundings, but emerged with their serenity and sweetness undisturbed. But never yet had he seen anyone who came out of dark places with mere anger and resentment against his sufferings, and yet with strength quite unimpaired. Armstrong seemed to him like that: the flames apparently had but hardened and annealed him. He had suffered under the lash of circumstance, not stout-heartedly nor with any loss of spirit, and now when for the first time he saw daylight, ahead, he was in no wise grateful for the dispersal of the darkness. He did not hail the sun or melt to the benignancy of its beams: he came out iron, remembering the hunger of the years that had starved his body and his soul, without subduing either, for physically he was hard and muscular, morally he was cynical, expecting from others little except such emotions as he himself shared, the instinct of self-defence, and the stoical bearing of such blows as he could not ward off. He was not in himself kind or unselfish or loving, and up till now he had practically never come across such qualities in others, and there was really no reason why he should believe in their existence. Hitherto, nobody as far as he remembered, had done him a good turn, unless thereby he reaped a personal benefit, and indeed Armstrong saw little reason why anybody should; for the world as he had known it, was not run on lines of altruistic philanthropy. The strong spoiled the weak, and the weak looked for opportunities of preying on the weaker. The rich paid as little as they could for the service of the poor, which was obviously the course that common-sense indicated, while the poor, the workers, combined so far as was possible, to make the rich pay more. There was no reason for either side to act otherwise, and thus he was puzzled to know why Craddock had offered him more than was necessary in order to get this play from him, and the ensuing contract.

As a matter of fact, Craddock had done so for exactly the same reasons as that which prompted him to give Charles Lathom sixty pounds for his sketch: he wanted to earn a sort of blind unreasoning gratitude from his new client, since clients possessed of this convenient spirit were far easier to manage and to deal with. But he had failed, and knew it: this new client, though he looked forward to finding him very remunerative indeed, could not possibly be considered to be blind with gratitude. But after all the main point was that he should sign the contract that embodied Craddock's proposals, which he was perfectly willing to do, and Craddock's butler, coming in with coffee, witnessed the transaction. A leaf from Craddock's cheque-book completed it.

All the appliances of refrigeration, in the way of electric fans and outside blinds, were not more than sufficient to keep Craddock's flat at an agreeable temperature and when, that evening, about six o'clock Mrs. Lathom put away her typewriter, and the neat piles of manuscript and transcription which had occupied her all day the heat in the little sunbaked sitting room in Sidney Street, which at meal times did duty also as dining-room, was almost overpowering. But she expected the younger of her two handsome boys to arrive from his holiday on the Thames with Charles in time for supper, and tired as she was and worn out with her daily work in this little furnace of a room, her fatigue forgot itself in thought of and preparation for his home-coming.

Reggie had, on a picture postcard that showed Thorley Weir, advertised her of the hour of his train's arrival, and before she need busy herself over the gas-stove that stood in the corner of the passage outside the sitting-room, and had to be fed with pennies to keep its flame burning, she found there was a quarter of an hour left her to rest herself, and if possible to get a few minutes' doze to clear the heat and heaviness from her eyes. This evening in spite of the home-coming of one of her

darlings, she was conscious of an unusual despondency, which, quite rightly, she told herself was only physical, and did not touch her spirits or her essential self. But this utter fatigue of body apparently reached down to her mind, and she could not help, since dozing proved an impossible feat, receding backwards into the ashes and desolation of the past. Yet, when she allowed herself to do so something stronger than any sense of desolation met her, love and her womanhood and her motherhood, and the blessing of her boys. And the tired eyes grew brighter again.

Strawberries had been very cheap that morning, and she had bought a basket of them which she had laid out on a newspaper on her bed, each separate, so that they should not bruise each other. She could give Reggie some toasted cheese as well, and tea and bread and butter. It was not such a feast as she had planned for him on the evening of his return, before he went back to his work again at Thistleton's Gallery next morning, but she had sent the boys a sovereign only the day before, in order to let them have a plethora of boat-hire and general jubilation, and until she took the completed copy of the manuscript back to the office next day, there was nothing more in the way of cash that could be expended. Womanlike, with all the direct and tender instincts of womanhood alert, she loved to treat her males to the material comforts of life. Her love had to express itself not only in affection but in the edible transcription of it, and while she would not have denied that Mary had chosen the good part, she had a strong sympathy with Martha, who showed her love in a fashion less purely spiritual perhaps, but none the less authentic. To serve, even if the only monument of service was unbruised strawberries, and the preparation of toasted cheese, cooked over a smelling gas-stove in the heat of this broiling evening, did not seem to her an inferior lot. She knew she had the Mary-love for her boys, but, though she did not reason about the point, nor even was conscious of it, she believed Martha had not chosen a bad part, when she put on her apron, so to speak, and got uncomfortably warm over the kitchen fire.

There were still a few minutes left before she need stir. Reggie's train was just about arriving now, and it would take him a good half-hour to walk home. In twenty minutes she could do her best by his supper, and have the toast and cheese hot and crisp for him, and she had already put the kettle on: tea would be ready simultaneously. She knew the chronology of these simple suppers very well.

She sat in a frayed arm-chair. The room looked west, and at this hour it was not possible to place it entirely out of the sun, and since there was a little wind blowing in she drew up the blind of the window, admitting both. It was her hands and her eyes that were so tired; for a couple of months now it had been something of a strain to read small writing, and to-day even the clear-cut letters of her typewriter were hard to focus. Very probably she was in need of glasses, but an oculist's fee, when expenses so nearly met income, was not a disbursement to be incurred lightly, and certainly her eyesight was not always so bad as it had been to-day. The strain of continual focussing had ruled two vertical lines between her eyebrows, as she had seen when she went to wash her hands after putting away her machine and before cooking Reggie's supper. She had seen them there before, but more faintly. To-day they were deeply carved.

Mrs. Lathom was but a year or two over forty, and she was aware that wrinkles such as these had no right as yet to set up so firm a dwelling-house on her face. But they only troubled her as a sign of eye-strain, a direction-post to the oculist's, and as symbols of approaching age they concerned her not at all, except in so far that approaching age might prove a drag on her energies and her work. Yet it was easy to see that as a girl she must have been beautiful, and women who have been beautiful as girls are not usually so careless over the signs of their lost youth. But the moment's glance sufficient to disentangle from her face the loveliness of its youth, would have been, except to the most superficial observers, enough to make him desist from his disentangling, and stand charmed and almost awed at the gifts the advance of years had brought her which so vastly out-valued the mere smoothness of line and brightness of colour that they had taken away. They with the losses and griefs that had visited her had taken so little in comparison with the love and the patience and the proved unconquerable serenity which they had brought her. Nor, except that for the moment, when heat and physical fatigue lay like

a mist over her face, dimming the inward brightness of it, had they robbed her of the lighter gifts of the spirit, humour and the appreciation of the kindly merriment that to cheerful souls runs through the web of life like some gold thread in the windings of a labyrinth. High moral courage and simple faith are without doubt essential to noble living on whatever scale, but it is only the puritanically minded who would discount the piquancy that an appreciation of the comical aspects of a world, possibly tragic, gives to the business of life. And a certain sparkle in Mrs. Lathom's grey eyes, a certain twist in her mouth clearly betokened that she was quite capable of laughing at those she loved when they behaved in a ridiculous manner. In the end without doubt a deeper-abiding tenderness would overscore her amusement, but she would never commit the error of blindly spoiling her idols.

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