

BENNETT ARNOLD

THESE TWAIN

Arnold Bennett

These Twain

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These Twain

BOOK I

THE WOMAN IN THE HOUSE

CHAPTER I

THE HOUSE

I

In the year 1892 Bleakridge, residential suburb of Bursley, was still most plainly divided into old and new, – that is to say, into the dull red or dull yellow with stone facings, and the bright red with terra cotta gimcrackery. Like incompatible liquids congealed in a pot, the two components had run into each other and mingled, but never mixed.

Paramount among the old was the house of the Member of Parliament, near the top of the important mound that separates Hanbridge from Bursley. The aged and widowed Member used the house little, but he kept it up, and sometimes came into it with an unexpectedness that extremely flattered the suburb. Thus you might be reading in the morning paper that the Member had given a lunch in London on the previous day to Cabinet Ministers and ladies as splendid as the Countess of Chell, and-glancing out of the window-you might see the Member himself walking down Trafalgar Road, sad, fragile, sedately alert, with his hands behind him, or waving a gracious hand to an acquaintance. Whereupon you would announce, not apathetically: "Member's gone down to MacIlvaine's!" ('MacIlvaine's' being the works in which the Member had an interest) and there would perhaps be a rush to the window. Those were the last great days of Bleakridge.

After the Member's house ranked such historic residences as those of Osmond Orgreave, the architect, (which had the largest, greenest garden and the best smoke-defying trees in Bleakridge), and Fearn, the Hanbridge lawyer; together with Manor "Cottage" (so-called, though a spacious house), where lived the mechanical genius who had revolutionised the pottery industry and strangely enough made a fortune thereby, and the dark abode of the High Church parson.

Next in importance came the three terraces, – Manor Terrace, Abbey Terrace, and the Sneyd Terrace-each consisting of three or four houses, and all on the west side of Trafalgar Road, with long back-gardens and a distant prospect of Hillport therefrom over the Manor fields. The Terraces, considered as architecture, were unbeautiful, old-fashioned, inconvenient, – perhaps paltry, as may be judged from the fact that rents ran as low as £25 a year; but they had been wondrous in their day, the pride of builders and owners and the marvel of a barbaric populace. They too had histories, which many people knew. Age had softened them and sanctioned their dignity. A gate might creak, but the harsh curves of its ironwork had been mollified by time. Moreover the property was always maintained in excellent repair by its landlords, and residents cared passionately for the appearance of the windows and the front-steps. The plenary respectability of the residents could not be impugned. They were as good as the best. For address, they would not give the number of the house in Trafalgar Road, but the name of its Terrace. Just as much as the occupiers of detached houses, they had sorted themselves out from the horde. Conservative or Liberal, they were anti-democratic, ever murmuring

to themselves as they descended the front-steps in the morning and mounted them in the evening: "Most folks are nobodies, but I am somebody." And this was true.

The still smaller old houses in between the Terraces, and even the old cottages in the side streets (which all ran to the east) had a similar distinction of caste, aloofness, and tradition. The least of them was scornful of the crowd, and deeply conscious of itself as a separate individuality. When the tenant-owner of a cottage in Manor Street added a bay-window to his front-room the event seemed enormous in Manor Street, and affected even Trafalgar Road, as a notorious clean-shaven figure in the streets may disconcert a whole quarter by growing a beard. The congeries of cottage yards between Manor Street and Higginbotham Street, as visible from certain high back-bedrooms in Trafalgar Road, – a crowded higgledy-piggledy of plum-coloured walls and chimneys, blue-brick pavements, and slate roofs-well illustrated the grand Victorian epoch of the Building Society, when eighteenpence was added weekly to eighteenpence, and land haggled over by the foot, and every brick counted, in the grim, long effort to break away from the mass.

The traditionalism of Bleakridge protected even Roman Catholicism in that district of Nonconformity, where there were at least three Methodist chapels to every church and where the adjective "popish" was commonly used in preference to "papal." The little "Catholic Chapel" and the priest's house with its cross-keys at the top of the mound were as respected as any other buildings, because Roman Catholicism had always been endemic there, since the age when the entire let belonged to Cistercian monks in white robes. A feebly endemic Catholicism and a complete exemption from tithes were all that remained of the Cistercian occupation. The exemption was highly esteemed by the possessing class.

Alderman Sutton, towards the end of the seventies, first pitted the new against the old in Bleakridge. The lifelong secretary of a first-class Building Society, he was responsible for a terrace of three commodious modern residences exactly opposite the house of the Member. The Member and Osmond Orgreave might modernise their antique houses as much as they liked, – they could never match the modernity of the Alderman's Terrace, to which, by the way, he declined to give a name. He was capable of covering his drawing-room walls with papers at three-and-six a roll, and yet he capriciously preferred numbers to a name! These houses cost twelve hundred pounds each (a lot of money in the happy far-off days when good bricks were only £1 a thousand, or a farthing apiece), and imposed themselves at once upon the respect and admiration of Bleakridge. A year or two later the Clayhanger house went up at the corner of Trafalgar Road and Hulton Street, and easily outvied the Sutton houses. Geographically at the centre of the residential suburb, it represented the new movement in Bleakridge at its apogee, and indeed was never beaten by later ambitious attempts.

Such fine erections, though nearly every detail of them challenged tradition, could not disturb Bleakridge's belief in the stability of society. But simultaneously whole streets of cheap small houses (in reality, pretentious cottages) rose round about. Hulton Street was all new and cheap. Oak Street offered a row of pink cottages to Osmond Orgreave's garden gates, and there were three other similar new streets between Oak Street and the Catholic Chapel. Jerry-building was practised in Trafalgar Road itself, on a large plot in full view of the Catholic Chapel, where a speculative builder, too hurried to use a measure, "stepped out" the foundations of fifteen cottages with his own bandy legs, and when the corner of a freshly-constructed cottage fell into the street remarked that accidents would happen and had the bricks replaced. But not every cottage was jerry-built. Many, perhaps most, were of fairly honest workmanship. All were modern, and relatively spacious, and much superior in plan to the old. All had bay-windows. And yet all their bay-windows together could not produce an effect equal to one bay-window in ancient Manor Street, because they had omitted to be individual. Not one showy dwelling was unlike another, nor desired to be unlike another.

The garish new streets were tenanted by magic. On Tuesday the paperhangers might be whistling in those drawing-rooms (called parlours in Manor Street), – on Wednesday bay-windows were curtained and chimneys smoking. And just as the cottages lacked individuality, so the tenants

were nobodies. At any rate no traditional person in Bleakridge knew who they were, nor where they came from, except that they came mysteriously up out of the town. (Not that there had been any shocking increase in the birthrate down there!) And no traditional person seemed to care. The strange inroad and portent ought to have puzzled and possibly to have intimidated traditional Bleakridge: but it did not. Bleakridge merely observed that "a lot of building was going on," and left the phenomenon at that. At first it was interested and flattered; then somewhat resentful and regretful. And even Edwin Clayhanger, though he counted himself among the enlightened and the truly democratic, felt hurt when quite nice houses, copying some features of his own on a small scale, and let to such people as insurance agents, began to fill up the remaining empty spaces of Trafalgar Road. He could not help thinking that the prestige of Bleakridge was being impaired.

II

Edwin Clayhanger, though very young in marriage, considered that he was getting on in years as a householder. His age was thirty-six. He had been married only a few months, under peculiar circumstances which rendered him self-conscious, and on an evening of August 1892, as he stood in the hall of his house awaiting the commencement of a postponed and unusual At Home, he felt absurdly nervous. But the nervousness was not painful; because he himself could laugh at it. He might be timid, he might be a little gawky, he might often have the curious sensation of not being really adult but only a boy after all, – the great impressive facts would always emerge that he was the respected head of a well-known family, that he was successful, that he had both ideas and money, and that his position as one of the two chief master-printers of the district would not be challenged. He knew that he could afford to be nervous. And further, since he was house-proud, he had merely to glance round his house in order to be reassured and puffed up.

Loitering near the foot of the stairs, discreetly stylish in an almost new blue serge suit and a quite new black satin tie, with the light of the gas on one side of his face, and the twilight through the glazed front-door mitigating the shadow on the other, Edwin mused pleasingly upon the whole organism of his home. Externally, the woodwork and metalwork of the house had just been repainted, and the brickwork pointed. He took pleasure in the thought of the long even lines of fresh mortar, and of the new sage-tinted spoutings and pipings, every foot of which he knew by heart and where every tube began and where it ended and what its purpose was. The nice fitting of a perpendicular spout into a horizontal one, and the curve of the joint from the eave to the wall of the house, and the elaborate staples that firmly held the spout to the wall, and the final curve of the spout that brought its orifice accurately over a spotless grid in the ground, – the perfection of all these ridiculous details, each beneath the notice of a truly celestial mind, would put the householder Edwin into a sort of contemplative ecstasy. Perhaps he was comical. But such inner experiences were part of his great interest in life, part of his large general passion.

Within the hall he regarded with equal interest and pride the photogravure of Bellini's "Agony in the Garden," from the National Gallery, and the radiator which he had just had installed. The radiator was only a half-measure, but it was his precious toy, his pet lamb, his mistress; and the theory of it was that by warming the hall and the well of the staircase it softly influenced the whole house and abolished draughts. He had exaggerated the chilliness of the late August night so that he might put the radiator into action. About the small furnace in the cellar that heated it he was both crotchety and extravagant. The costly efficiency of the radiator somewhat atoned in his mind for the imperfections of the hot water apparatus, depending on the kitchen boiler. Even in 1892 this middle-class pioneer and sensualist was dreaming of an ideal house in which inexhaustible water was always positively steaming, so that if a succession of persons should capriciously desire hot baths in the cold middle of the night, their collective fancy might be satisfied.

Bellini's picture was the symbol of an artistic revolution in Edwin. He had read somewhere that it was "perhaps the greatest picture in the world." A critic's exhortation to "observe the loving realistic passion shown in the foreshortening of the figure of the sleeping apostle" had remained in his mind; and, thrilled, he would point out this feature of the picture alike to the comprehending and the uncomprehending. The hanging-up of the Bellini, in its strange frame of stained unpolished oak, had been an epochal event, closing one era and inaugurating another. And yet, before the event, he had not even noticed the picture on a visit to the National Gallery! A hint, a phrase murmured in the right tone in a periodical, a glimpse of an illustration, – and the mighty magic seed was sown. In a few months all Victorian phenomena had been put upon their trial, and most of them condemned. And condemned without even the forms of justice! Half a word (in the right tone) might ruin any of them. Thus was Sir Frederick Leighton, P.R.A., himself overthrown. One day his "Bath of Psyche" reigned in Edwin's bedroom, and the next it had gone, and none knew why. But certain aged Victorians, such as Edwin's Auntie Hamps, took the disappearance of the licentious engraving as a sign that the beloved queer Edwin was at last coming to his senses-as, of course, they knew he ultimately would. He did not and could not explain. More and more he was growing to look upon his house as an island, cut off by a difference of manners from the varnished barbarism of multitudinous new cottages, and by an immensely more profound difference of thought from both the cottages and the larger houses. It seemed astounding to Edwin that modes of thought so violently separative as his and theirs could exist so close together and under such appearances of similarity. Not even all the younger members of the Orgreave family, who counted as his nearest friends, were esteemed by Edwin to be meet for his complete candour.

The unique island was scarcely a dozen years old, but historical occurrences had aged it for Edwin. He had opened the doors of all three reception-rooms, partly to extend the benign sway of the radiator, and partly so that he might judge the total effect of the illuminated chambers and improve that effect if possible. And each room bore the mysterious imprints of past emotion.

In the drawing-room, with its new orange-coloured gas-globes that gilded everything beneath them, Edwin's father used to sit on Sunday evenings, alone. And one Sunday evening, when Edwin, entering, had first mentioned to his father a woman's name, his father had most terribly humiliated him. But now it seemed as if some other youth, and not Edwin, had been humiliated, so completely was the wound healed... And he could remember leaning in the doorway of the drawing-room one Sunday morning, and his sister Clara was seated at the piano, and his sister Maggie, nursing a baby of Clara's, by her side, and they were singing Balfe's duet "Excelsior," and his father stood behind them, crying, crying steadily, until at length the bitter old man lost control of himself and sobbed aloud under the emotional stress of the women's voices, and Clara cheerfully upbraided him for foolishness; and Edwin had walked suddenly away. This memory was somehow far more poignant than the memory of his humiliation... And in the drawing-room too he had finally betrothed himself to Hilda. That by comparison was only yesterday; yet it was historical and distant. He was wearing his dressing-gown, being convalescent from influenza; he could distinctly recall the feel of his dressing-gown; and Hilda came in-over her face was a veil...

The dining-room, whose large glistening table was now covered with the most varied and modern "refreshments" for the At Home, had witnessed no event specially dramatic, but it had witnessed hundreds of monotonous tragic meals at which the progress of his father's mental malady and the approach of his death could be measured by the old man's increasing disability to distinguish between his knife and his fork; it had seen Darius Clayhanger fed like a baby. And it had never been the same dining-room since. Edwin might transform it, re-paper it, re-furnish it, – the mysterious imprint remained...

And then there was the little "breakfast-room," inserted into the plan of the house between the hall and the kitchen. Nothing had happened there, because the life of the household had never adjusted itself to the new, borrowed convention of the "breakfast-room." Nothing? But the most

sensational thing had happened there! When with an exquisite passing timidity she took possession of Edwin's house as his wife, Hilda had had a sudden gust of audacity in the breakfast-room. A mature woman (with a boy aged ten to prove it), she had effervesced into the naïve gestures of a young girl who has inherited a boudoir. "This shall be my very own room, and I shall arrange it just how I like, without asking you about *anything*. And it will be my very own." She had not offered an idea; she had announced a decision. Edwin had had other notions for the room, but he perceived that he must bury them in eternal silence, and yield eagerly to this caprice. Thus to acquiesce had given him deep and strange joy. He was startled, perhaps, to discover that he had brought into his house-not a woman, but a tripartite creature-woman, child, and sibyl. Neither Maggie nor Clara, nor Janet Orgreave, nor even Hilda before she became his wife, had ever aroused in him the least suspicion that a woman might be a tripartite creature. He was married, certainly-nobody could be more legally and respectably married than was he-but the mere marriage seemed naught in comparison with the enormous fact that he had got this unexampled creature in his house and was living with her, she at his mercy, and he at hers. Enchanting escapade! Solemn doom! ... By the way, she had yet done nothing with the breakfast-room. Yes, she had stolen a "cabinet" gold frame from the shop, and put his photograph into it, and stuck his picture on the mantelpiece; but that was all. She would not permit him to worry her about her secret designs for the breakfast-room. The breakfast-room was her affair. Indeed the whole house was her affair. It was no longer his house, in which he could issue orders without considering another individuality-orders that would infallibly be executed, either cheerfully or glumly, by the plump spinster, Maggie. He had to mind his p's and q's; he had to be wary, everywhere. The creature did not simply live in the house; she pervaded it. As soon as he opened the front-door he felt her.

III

She was now upstairs in their joint bedroom, dressing for the At Home. All day he had feared she might be late, and as he looked at the hall-clock he saw that the risk was getting acute.

Before the domestic rearrangements preceding the marriage had been fully discussed, he had assumed, and Maggie and Clara had assumed, and Auntie Hamps had absolutely assumed, that the husband and wife would occupy the long empty bedroom of old Darius, because it was two-foot-six broader than Edwin's, and because it was the "principal" bedroom. But Hilda had said No to him privately. Whereupon, being himself almost morbidly unsentimental, he had judiciously hinted that to object to a room because an old man had died in it under distressing circumstances was to be morbidly sentimental and unworthy of her. Whereupon she had mysteriously smiled, and called him sweet bad names, and kissed him, and hung on his neck. *She* sentimental! Could not the great stupid see without being told that what influenced her was not an aversion for his father's bedroom, but a predilection for Edwin's. She desired that they should inhabit his room. She wanted to sleep in his room; and to wake up in it, and to feel that she was immersing herself in his past... (Ah! The exciting flattery, like an aphrodisiac!) And she would not allow him to uproot the fixed bookcases on either side of the hearth. She said that for her they were part of the room itself. Useless to argue that they occupied space required for extra furniture! She would manage! She did manage. He found that the acme of convenience for a husband had not been achieved, but convenience was naught in the rapture of the escapade. He had "needed shaking up," as they say down there, and he was shaken up.

Nevertheless, though undoubtedly shaken up, he had the male wit to perceive that the bedroom episode had been a peculiar triumph for himself. Her attitude in it, imperious superficially, was in truth an impassioned and outright surrender to him. And further, she had at once become a frankly admiring partisan of his theory of bedrooms. The need for a comfortable solitude earlier in life had led Edwin to make his bedroom habitable by means of a gas-stove, an easy chair, and minor amenities. When teased by hardy compatriots about his sybaritism Edwin was apt sometimes to flush and be "nettled," and he would make offensive un-English comments upon the average bedroom of

the average English household, which was so barbaric that during eight months of the year you could not maintain your temperature in it unless you were either in bed or running about the room, and that even in Summer you could not sit down therein at ease because there was nothing easy to sit on, nor a table to sit at nor even a book to read. He would caustically ask to be informed why the supposedly practical and comfort-loving English were content with an Alpine hut for a bedroom. And in this way he would go on. He was rather pleased with the phrase "Alpine hut." One day he had overheard Hilda replying to an acquaintance upstairs: "People may say what they like, but Edwin and I don't care to sleep in an Alpine hut." She had caught it! She was his disciple in that matter! And how she had appreciated his easy-chair! As for calm deliberation in dressing and undressing, she could astonishingly and even disconcertingly surpass him in the quality. But it is to be noted that she would not permit her son to have a gas-stove in his bedroom. Nor would she let him occupy the disdained principal bedroom, her argument being that that room was too large for a little boy. Maggie Clayhanger's old bedroom was given to George, and the principal bedroom remained empty.

CHAPTER II

HILDA ON THE STAIRS

I

Ada descended the stairs, young, slim, very neat. Ada was one of Hilda's two new servants. Before taking charge of the house Hilda had ordained the operation called "a clean sweep," and Edwin had approved. The elder of Maggie's two servants had been a good one, but Hilda had shown no interest in the catalogue of her excellences. She wanted fresh servants. Maggie, like Edwin, approved, but only as a general principle. In the particular case she had hinted that her prospective sister-in-law was perhaps unwise to let slip a tested servant. Hilda wanted not merely fresh servants, but young servants agreeable to behold. "I will not have a lot of middle-aged scowling women about my house," Hilda had said. Maggie was reserved, but her glance was meant to remind Hilda that in those end-of-the-century days mistresses had to be content with what they could get. Young and comely servants were all very well-if you could drop on them, but supposing you couldn't? The fact was that Maggie could not understand Hilda's insistence on youth and comeliness in a servant, and she foresaw trouble for Hilda. Hilda, however, obtained her desire. She was outspoken with her servants. If Edwin after his manner implied that she was dangerously ignoring the touchiness of the modern servant, she would say indifferently: "It's always open to them to go if they don't like it." They did not go. It is notorious that foolhardy mistresses are often very lucky.

As soon as Ada caught sight of her master in the hall she became self-conscious; all the joints of her body seemed to be hung on very resilient springs, and, – reddening slightly, – she lowered her gaze and looked at her tripping toes. Edwin seldom spoke to her more than once a day, and not always that. He had one day visited the large attic into which, with her colleague, she disappeared late at night and from which she emerged early in the morning, and he had seen two small tin trunks and some clothes behind the door, and an alarm-clock and a portrait of a fireman on the mantelpiece. (The fireman, he seemed to recollect, was her brother.) But she was a stranger in his house, and he had no sustained curiosity about her. The days were gone when he used to be the intimate of servants-of Mrs. Nixon, for example, sole prop of the Clayhanger family for many years, and an entirely human being to Edwin. Mrs. Nixon had never been either young, slim, or neat. She was dead. The last servant whom he could be said to have known was a pert niece of Mrs. Nixon's-now somebody's prolific wife and much changed. And he was now somebody's husband, and bearded, and perhaps occasionally pompous, and much changed in other ways. So that enigmatic Adas bridled at sight of him and became intensely aware of themselves. Still, this Ada in her smartness was a pretty sight for his eyes as like an aspen she trembled down the stairs, though the coarseness of her big red hands, and the vulgarity of her accent were a surprising contrast to her waist and her fine carriage.

He knew she had been hooking her mistress's dress, and that therefore the hooking must be finished. He liked to think of Hilda being attired thus in the bedroom by a natty deferential wench. The process gave to Hilda a luxurious, even an oriental quality, which charmed him. He liked the suddenly impressive tone in which the haughty Hilda would say to Ada, "Your master," as if mentioning a sultan. He was more and more anxious lest Hilda should be late, and he wanted to ask Ada: "Is Mrs. Clayhanger coming down?"

But he discreetly forbore. He might have run up to the bedroom and burst in on the toilette-Hilda would have welcomed him. But he preferred to remain with his anxiety where he was, and meditate upon Hilda bedecking herself up there in the bedroom-to please him; to please not the guests, but him.

Ada disappeared down the narrow passage leading to the kitchen, and a moment later he heard a crude giggle, almost a scream, and some echo of the rough tones in which the servants spoke to each other when they were alone in the kitchen. There were in fact two Adas; one was as timid as a fawn with a voice like a delicate invalid's; the other a loud-mouthed hoity-toity girl such as rushed out of potbanks in flannel apron at one o'clock. The Clayhanger servants were satisfactory, more than satisfactory, the subject of favourable comment for their neatness among the mistresses of other servants. He liked them to be about; their presence and their official demeanour flattered him; they perfected the complex superiority of his house, – that island. But when he overheard them alone together, or when he set himself to imagine what their soul's life was, he was more than ever amazed at the unnoticed profound differences between modes of thought that in apparently the most natural manner could exist so close together without producing a cataclysm. Auntie Hamps's theory was that they were all-he, she, the servants-equal in the sight of God!

II

Hilda's son, George Edwin, sidled surprisingly into the hall. He was wearing a sailor suit, very new, and he had probably been invisible somewhere against the blue curtains of the drawing-room window-an example of nature's protective mimicry. George was rather small for his ten years. Dark, like his mother, he had her eyes and her thick eyebrows that almost met in the middle, and her pale skin. As for his mind, he seemed to be sometimes alarmingly precocious and sometimes a case of arrested development. In this and many other respects he greatly resembled other boys. The son of a bigamist can have no name, unless it be his mother's maiden name, but George knew nothing of that. He had borne his father's name, and when at the exciting and puzzling period of his mother's marriage he had learnt that his surname would in future be Clayhanger he had a little resented the affront to his egoism. Edwin's explanation, however, that the change was for the convenience of people in general had caused him to shrug his shoulders in concession and to murmur casually: "Oh, well then-!" He seemed to be assenting with loftiness: "If it's any particular use to the whole world, I don't really mind."

"I say, uncle," he began.

Edwin had chosen this form of address. "Stepfather" was preposterous, and "father" somehow offended him; so he constituted himself an uncle.

"Hello, kid!" said he. "Can you find room to keep anything else in your pockets besides your hands?"

George snatched his hands out of his pockets. Then he smiled confidently up. These two were friends. Edwin was as proud as the boy of the friendship, and perhaps more flattered. At first he had not cared for George, being repelled by George's loud, positive tones, his brusque and often violent gestures, and his intense absorption in himself. But gradually he had been won by the boy's boyishness, his smile, his little, soft body, his unspoken invocations, his resentment of injustice (except when strict justice appeared to clash with his own interests), his absolute impotence against adult decrees, his touching fatalism, his recondite personal distinction that flashed and was gone, and his occasional cleverness and wit. He admitted that George charmed him. But he well knew that he also charmed George. He had a way of treating George as an equal that few children (save possibly Clara's) could have resisted. True, he would quiz the child, but he did not forbid the child to quiz. The mother was profoundly relieved and rejoiced by this friendship. She luxuriated in it. Edwin might well have been inimical to the child; he might through the child have shown a jealousy of the child's father. But, somewhat to the astonishment of even Edwin himself, he never saw the father in the child, nor thought of the father, nor resented the parenthood that was not his. For him the child was an individual. And in spite of his stern determination not to fall into the delusions of conceited parents, he could not help thinking that George was a remarkable child.

"Have you seen my horse?" asked George.

"Have I seen your horse? ... Oh! ... I've seen that you've left it lying about on the hall-table."

"I put it there so that you'd see it," George persuasively excused himself for the untidiness.

"Well, let's inspect it," Edwin forgave him, and picked up from the table a piece of cartridge-paper on which was a drawing of a great cart-horse with shaggy feet. It was a vivacious sketch.

"You're improving," said Edwin, judiciously, but in fact much impressed. Surely few boys of ten could draw as well as that! The design was strangely more mature than certain quite infantile watercolours that Edwin had seen scarcely a year earlier.

"It's rather good, isn't it?" George suggested, lifting up his head so that he could just see over the edge of the paper which Edwin held at the level of his watch-chain.

"I've met worse. Where did you see this particular animal?"

"I saw him down near the Brewery this morning. But when I'm doing a horse, I see him on the paper before I begin to draw, and I just draw round him."

Edwin thought:

"This kid is no ordinary kid."

He said:

"Well, we'll pin it up here. We'll have a Royal Academy and hear what the public has to say." He took a pin from under his waistcoat.

"That's not level," said George.

And when Edwin had readjusted the pin, George persisted boldly:

"That's not level either."

"It's as level as it's going to be. I expect you've been drawing horses instead of practising your piano."

He looked down at the mysterious little boy, who lived always so much nearer to the earth's surface than himself.

George nodded simply, and then scratched his head.

"I suppose if I don't practise while I'm young I shall regret it in after life, shan't I?"

"Who told you that?"

"It's what Auntie Hamps said to me, I think... I say, uncle."

"What's up?"

"Is Mr. John coming to-night?"

"I suppose so. Why?"

"Oh, nothing... I say, uncle."

"That's twice you've said it."

The boy smiled.

"You know that piece in the Bible about if two of you shall agree on earth-?"

"What of it?" Edwin asked rather curtly, anticipating difficulties.

"I don't think two *boys* would be enough, would they? Two grown-ups might. But I'm not so sure about two boys. You see in the very next verse it says two *or three*, gathered together."

"Three might be more effective. It's always as well to be on the safe side."

"Could you pray for anything? A penknife, for instance?"

"Why not?"

"But could you?" George was a little impatient.

"Better ask your mother," said Edwin, who was becoming self-conscious under the strain.

George exploded coarsely:

"Poh! It's no good asking mother."

Said Edwin:

"The great thing in these affairs is to know what you want, and to *want* it. Concentrate as hard as you can, a long time in advance. No use half wanting!"

"Well, there's one thing that's poz [positive]. I couldn't begin to concentrate to-night."

"Why not?"

"Who could?" George protested. "We're all so nervous to-night, aren't we, with this At Home business. And I know I never could concentrate in my best clothes."

For Edwin the boy with his shocking candour had suddenly precipitated out of the atmosphere, as it were, the collective nervousness of the household, made it into a phenomenon visible, tangible, oppressive. And the household was no longer a collection of units, but an entity. A bell rang faintly in the kitchen, and the sound abraded his nerves. The first guests were on the threshold, and Hilda was late. He looked at the clock. Yes, she was late. The hour named in the invitations was already past. All day he had feared lest she should be late, and she was late. He looked at the glass of the front-door; but night had come, and it was opaque. Ada tripped into view and ran upstairs.

"Don't you hear the front-door?" he stopped her flight.

"It was missis's bell, sir."

"Ah!" Respite!

Ada disappeared.

Then another ring! And no parlour-maid to answer the bell! Naturally! Naturally Hilda, forgetting something at the last moment, had taken the parlour-maid away precisely when the girl was needed! Oh! He had foreseen it! He could hear shuffling outside and could even distinguish forms through the glass-many forms. All the people converging from various streets upon the waiting nervousness of the household seemed to have arrived at once.

George moved impulsively towards the front-door.

"Where are you going?" Edwin asked roughly. "Come here. It's not your place to open the door. Come with me in the drawing-room."

It was no affair of Edwin's, thought Edwin crossly and uncompromisingly, if guests were kept waiting at the front-door. It was Hilda's affair; she was the mistress of the house, and the blame was hers.

At high speed Ada swept with streamers down the stairs, like a squirrel down the branch of a tree. And then came Hilda.

III

She stood at the turn of the stairs, waiting while the front-door was opened. He and George could see her over and through the banisters. And at sight of her triumphant and happy air, all Edwin's annoyance melted. He did not desire that it should melt, but it melted. She was late. He could not rely on her not to be late. In summoning the parlourmaid to her bedroom when the parlourmaid ought to have been on duty downstairs she had acted indefensibly and without thought. No harm, as it happened, was done. Sheer chance often thus saved her, but logically her double fault was not thereby mitigated. He felt that if he forgave her, if he dismissed the charge and wiped the slate, he was being false to the great male principles of logic and justice. The godlike judge in him resented the miscarriage of justice. Nevertheless justice miscarried. And the weak husband said like a woman: "What does it matter?" Such was her shameful power over him, of which the unscrupulous creature was quite aware.

As he looked at her he asked himself: "Is she magnificent? Or is she just ordinary and am I deluded? Does she seem her age? Is she a mature woman getting past the prime, or has she miraculously kept herself a young girl for me?"

In years she was thirty-five. She had large bones, and her robust body, neither plump nor slim, showed the firm, assured carriage of its age. It said: "I have stood before the world, and I cannot be intimidated." Still, marriage had rejuvenated her. She was marvellously young at times, and experience would drop from her and leave the girl that he had first known and kissed ten years

earlier; but a less harsh, less uncompromising girl. At their first acquaintance she had repelled him with her truculent seriousness. Nowadays she would laugh for no apparent reason, and even pirouette. Her complexion was good; he could nearly persuade himself that that olive skin had not suffered in a decade of distress and disasters.

Previous to her marriage she had shown little interest in dress. But now she would spasmodically worry about her clothes, and she would make Edwin worry. He had to decide, though he had no qualifications as an arbiter. She would scowl at a dressmaker as if to say: "For God's sake do realise that upon you is laid the sacred responsibility of helping me to please my husband!" To-night she was wearing a striped blue dress, imperceptibly décolletée, with the leg-of-mutton sleeves of the period. The colours, two shades of blue, did not suit her. But she imagined that they suited her, and so did he; and the frock was elaborate, was the result of terrific labour and produced a rich effect, meet for a hostess of position.

The mere fact that this woman with no talent for coquetry should after years of narrow insufficiency scowl at dressmakers and pout at senseless refractory silks in the yearning for elegance was utterly delicious to Edwin. Her presence there on the landing of the stairs was in the nature of a miracle. He had wanted her, and he had got her. In the end he had got her, and nothing had been able to stop him—not even the obstacle of her tragic adventure with a rascal and a bigamist. The strong magic of his passion had forced destiny to render her up to him mysteriously intact, after all. The impossible had occurred, and society had accepted it, beaten. There she was, dramatically, with her thick eyebrows, and the fine wide nostrils and the delicate lobe of the ear, and that mouth that would startlingly fasten on him and kiss the life out of him.

"There is dear Hilda!" said someone at the door amid the arriving group.

None but Auntie Hamps would have said 'dear' Hilda. Maggie, Clara, and even Janet Orgreave never used sentimental adjectives on occasions of ceremony.

And in her clear, precise, dominating voice Hilda with gay ease greeted the company from above:

"Good evening, all!"

"What the deuce was I so upset about just now?" thought Edwin, in sudden, instinctive, exulting felicity: "Everything is absolutely all right."

CHAPTER III

ATTACK AND REPULSE

I

The entering guests were Edwin's younger sister Clara with her husband Albert Benbow, his elder sister Maggie, Auntie Hamps, and Mr. Peartree. They had arrived together, and rather unfashionably soon after the hour named in the invitation, because the Benbows had called at Auntie Hamps's on the way up, and the Benbows were always early, both in arriving and in departing, "on account of the children." They called themselves "early birds." Whenever they were out of the nest in the evening they called themselves early birds. They used the comparison hundreds, thousands, of times, and never tired of it; indeed each time they were convinced that they had invented it freshly for the occasion.

Said Auntie Hamps, magnificent in jetty black, handsome, and above all imposing:

"I knew you would be delighted to meet Mr. Peartree again, Edwin. He is staying the night at my house-I can be so much more hospitable now Maggie is with me-and I insisted he should come up with us. But it needed no insisting."

The old erect lady looked from Mr. Peartree with pride towards her nephew.

Mr. Peartree was a medium-sized man of fifty, with greying sandy hair. Twenty years before, he had been second minister in the Bursley Circuit of the Wesleyan Methodist Connexion. He was now Superintendent Minister in a Cheshire circuit. The unchangeable canons of Wesleyanism permit its ministers to marry, and celibacy is even discouraged, for the reason that wives and daughters are expected to toil in the cause, and their labour costs the circuit not a halfpenny. But the canons forbid ministers to take root and found a home. Eleven times in thirty years Mr. Peartree had been forced to migrate to a strange circuit and to adapt his much-travelled furniture and family to a house which he had not chosen, and which his wife generally did not like. During part of the period he had secretly resented the autocracy of Superintendent Ministers, and during the remainder he had learnt that Superintendent Ministers are not absolute autocrats.

He was neither overworked nor underpaid. He belonged to the small tradesman class, and, keeping a shop in St. Luke's Square, he might well have worked harder for less money than he now earned. His vocation, however, in addition to its desolating nomadic quality, had other grave drawbacks. It gave him contact with a vast number of human beings, but the abnormal proportion among them of visionaries, bigots, hypocrites, and petty office-seekers falsified his general estimate of humanity. Again, the canons rigorously forbade him to think freely for himself on the subjects which in theory most interested him; with the result that he had remained extremely ignorant through the very fear of knowledge, that he was a warm enemy of freedom, and that he habitually carried intellectual dishonesty to the verge of cynicism. Thirdly, he was obliged always to be diplomatic (except of course with his family), and nature had not meant him for the diplomatic career. He was so sick of being all things to all men that he even dreamed diplomatic dreams as a galley-slave will dream of the oar; and so little gifted for the rôle that he wore insignificant tight turned-down collars, never having perceived the immense moral advantage conferred on the diplomatist by a high, loose, wide-rolling collar. Also he was sick of captivity, and this in no wise lessened his objection to freedom. He had lost all youthful enthusiasm, and was in fact equally bored with earth and with heaven.

Nevertheless, he had authority and security. He was accustomed to the public gaze and to the forms of deference. He knew that he was as secure as a judge, – and far more secure than a cabinet-minister. Nothing but the inconceivable collapse of a powerful and wealthy sect could affect his

position or his livelihood to the very end of life. Hence, beneath his weariness and his professional attitudinarianism there was a hint of the devil-may-care that had its piquancy. He could foresee with indifference even the distant but approaching day when he would have to rise in the pulpit and assert that the literal inspiration of the Scriptures was not and never had been an essential article of Wesleyan faith.

Edwin blanched at the apparition of Mr. Peartree. That even Auntie Hamps should dare uninvited to bring a Wesleyan Minister to the party was startling; but that the minister should be Mr. Peartree staggered him. For twenty years and more Edwin had secretly, and sometimes in public, borne a tremendous grudge against Mr. Peartree. He had execrated, anathematised, and utterly excommunicated Mr. Peartree, and had extended the fearful curse to his family, all his ancestors, and all his descendants. When Mr. Peartree was young and fervent in the service of heaven he had had the monstrous idea of instituting a Saturday Afternoon Bible Class for schoolboys. Abetted by parents weak-minded and cruel, he had caught and horribly tortured some score of miserable victims, of whom Edwin was one. The bitter memory of those weekly half-holidays thieved from him and made desolate by a sanctimonious crank had never softened, nor had Edwin ever forgiven Mr. Peartree.

It was at the sessions of the Bible Class that Edwin, while silently perfecting himself in the art of profanity and blasphemy, had in secret fury envenomed his instinctive mild objection to the dogma, the ritual, and the spirit of conventional Christianity, especially as exemplified in Wesleyan Methodism. He had left Mr. Peartree's Bible Class a convinced anti-religionist, a hater and despiser of all that the Wesleyan Chapel and Mr. Peartree stood for. He deliberately was not impartial, and he took a horrid pleasure in being unfair. He knew well that Methodism had produced many fine characters, and played a part in the moral development of the race; but he would not listen to his own knowledge. Nothing could extenuate, for him, the noxiousness of Methodism. On the other hand he was full of glee if he could add anything to the indictment against it and Christianity. Huxley's controversial victories over Gladstone were then occurring in the monthly press, and he acclaimed them with enormous gusto. When he first read that the Virgin Birth was a feature of sundry creeds more ancient than Christianity, his private satisfaction was intense and lasted acutely for days. When he heard that Methodism had difficulty in maintaining its supply of adequately equipped ministers, he rejoiced with virulence. His hostility was the more significant in that it was concealed-embedded like a foreign substance in the rather suave gentleness of his nature. At intervals-increasingly frequent, it is true-he would carry it into the chapel itself; for through mingled cowardice and sharp prudence, he had not formally left the Connexion. To compensate himself for such bowings-down he would now and then assert, judicially to a reliable male friend, or with ferocious contempt to a scandalised defenceless sister, that, despite all parsons, religion was not a necessity of the human soul, and that he personally had never felt the need of it and never would. In which assertion he was profoundly sincere.

And yet throughout he had always thought of himself as a rebel against authority; and-such is the mysterious intimidating prestige of the past-he was outwardly an apologetic rebel. Neither his intellectual pride nor his cold sustained resentment, nor his axiomatic conviction of the crude and total falseness of Christian theology, nor all three together, had ever sufficed to rid him of the self-excusing air. When Auntie Hamps spoke with careful reverence of "the Super" (short for "superintendent minister"), the word had never in thirty years quite failed to inspire in him some of the awe with which he had heard it as an infant. Just as a policeman was not an employee but a *policeman*, so a minister was not a person of the trading-class who happened to have been through a certain educational establishment, subscribed to certain beliefs, submitted to certain ceremonies and adopted a certain costume, – but a *minister*, a being inexplicably endowed with authority, – in fact a sort of arch-policeman. And thus, while detesting and despising him, Edwin had never thought of Abel Peartree as merely a man.

Now, in the gas-lit bustle of the hall, after an interval of about twenty years, he beheld again his enemy, his bugbear, his loathed oppressor, the living symbol of all that his soul condemned.

Said Mrs. Hamps:

"I reminded Mr. Peartree that you used to attend his Bible-class, Edwin. Do you remember? I hope you do."

"Oh, yes!" said Edwin, with a slight nervous laugh, blushing. His eye caught Clara's, but there was no sign whatever of the old malicious grin on her maternal face. Nor did Maggie's show a tremor. And, of course, the majestic duplicity of Auntie Hamps did not quiver under the strain. So that the Rev. Mr. Peartree, protesting honestly that he should have recognised his old pupil Mr. Clayhanger anywhere, never suspected the terrific drama of the moment.

And the next moment there was no drama... Teacher and pupil shook hands. The recognition was mutual. To Edwin, Mr. Peartree, save for the greying of his hair, had not changed. His voice, his form, his gestures, were absolutely the same. Only, instead of being Mr. Peartree, he was a man like another man—a commonplace, hard-featured, weary man; a spare little man, with a greenish-black coat and bluish-white low collar; a perfunctory, listless man with an unpleasant voice; a man with the social code of the Benbows and Auntie Hamps; a man the lines of whose face disclosed a narrow and self-satisfied ignorance; a man whose destiny had forbidden him ever to be natural; the usual snobbish man, who had heard of the importance and the success and the wealth of Edwin Clayhanger and who kowtowed thereto and was naïvely impressed thereby, and proud that Edwin Clayhanger had once been his pupil; and withal an average decent fellow.

Edwin rather liked the casual look in Mr. Peartree's eyes that said: "My being here is part of my job. I'm indifferent. I do what I have to do, and I really don't care. I have paid tens of thousands of calls and I shall pay tens of thousands more. If I am bored I am paid to be bored, and I repeat I really don't care." This was the human side of Mr. Peartree showing itself. It endeared him to Edwin.

"Not a bad sort of cuss, after all!" thought Edwin.

All the carefully tended rage and animosity of twenty years evaporated out of his heart and was gone. He did not forgive Mr. Peartree, because there was no Mr. Peartree—there was only this man. And there was no Wesleyan chapel either, but only an ugly forlorn three-quarters-empty building at the top of Duck Bank. And Edwin was no longer an apologetic rebel, nor even any kind of a rebel. It occurred to nobody, not even to the mighty Edwin, that in those few seconds the history of dogmatic religion had passed definitely out of one stage into another.

Abel Peartree nonchalantly, and with a practised aplomb which was not disturbed even by the vision of George's heroic stallion, said the proper things to Edwin and Hilda; and it became known, somehow, that the parson was re-visiting Bursley in order to deliver his well-known lecture entitled "The Mantle and Mission of Elijah," — the sole lecture of his repertoire, but it had served to raise him ever so slightly out of the ruck of 'Supers.' Hilda patronised him. Against the rich background of her home, she assumed the pose of the grand lady. Abel Peartree seemed to like the pose, and grew momentarily vivacious in knightly response. "And why not?" said Edwin to himself, justifying his wife after being a little critical of her curtness.

Then, when the conversation fell, Auntie Hamps discreetly suggested that she and the girls should "go upstairs." The negligent Hilda had inexcusably forgotten in her nervous excitement that on these occasions arriving ladies should be at once escorted to the specially-titivated best bedroom, there to lay their things on the best counterpane. She perhaps ought to have atoned for her negligence by herself leading Auntie Hamps to the bedroom. But instead she deputed Ada. "And why not?" said Edwin to himself again. As the ladies mounted Mr. Peartree laughed genuinely at one of Albert Benbow's characteristic pleasantries, which always engloomed Edwin. "Kindred spirits, those two!" thought the superior sardonic Edwin, and privately raised his eyebrows to his wife, who answered the signal.

II

Somewhat later, various other guests having come and distributed themselves over the reception-rooms, the chandeliers glinted down their rays upon light summer frocks and some jewellery and coats of black and dark grey and blue; and the best counterpanes in the best bedroom were completely hidden by mantles and cloaks, and the hatstand in the hall heavily clustered with hats and caps. The reception was in being, and the interior full of animation. Edwin, watchful and hospitably anxious, wandered out of the drawing-room into the hall. The door of the breakfast-room was ajar, and he could hear Clara's voice behind it. He knew that the Benbows and Maggie and Auntie Hamps were all in the breakfast-room, and he blamed chiefly Clara for this provincial clannishness, which was so characteristic of her. Surely Auntie Hamps at any rate ought to have realised that the duty of members of the family was to spread themselves among the other guests!

He listened.

"No," Clara was saying, "we don't know what's happened to him since he came out of prison. He got two years." She was speaking in what Edwin called her 'scandal' tones, low, clipped, intimate, eager, blissful.

And then Albert Benbow's voice:

"He's had the good sense not to bother us."

Edwin, while resenting the conversation, and the Benbows' use of "we" and "us" in a matter which did not concern them, was grimly comforted by the thought of their ignorance of a detail which would have interested them passionately. None but Hilda and himself knew that the bigamist was at that moment in prison again for another and a later offence. Everything had been told but that.

"Of course," said Clara, "they needn't have said anything about the bigamy at all, and nobody outside the family need have known that poor Hilda was not just an ordinary widow. But we all thought-"

"I don't know so much about that, Clary," Albert Benbow interrupted his wife; "you mustn't forget his real wife came to Turnhill to make enquiries. That started a hare."

"Well, you know what I mean," said Clara vaguely.

Mr. Peartree's voice came in:

"But surely the case was in the papers?"

"I expect it was in the Sussex papers," Albert replied. "You see, they went through the ceremony of marriage at Lewes. But it never got into the local rag, because he got married in his real name—Cannon wasn't his real name; and he'd no address in the Five Towns, then. He was just a boarding-house keeper at Brighton. It was a miracle it didn't get into the *Signal*, if you ask me; but it didn't. I happen to know" – his voice grew important—"that the *Signal* people have an arrangement with the Press Association for a full report of all matrimonial cases that 'ud be likely to interest the district. However, the Press Association weren't quite on the spot that time. And it's not surprising they weren't, either."

Clara resumed:

"No. It never came out. Still, as I say, we all thought it best not to conceal anything. Albert strongly advised Edwin not to attempt any such thing." ("What awful rot!" thought Edwin.) "So we just mentioned it quietly like to a few friends. After all, poor Hilda was perfectly innocent. Of course she felt her position keenly when she came to live here after the wedding." ("Did she indeed!" thought Edwin.) "Edwin would have the wedding in London. We did so feel for her." ("Did you indeed!" thought Edwin.) "She wouldn't have an At Home. I knew it was a mistake not to. We all knew. But no, *she would not*. Folks began to talk. They thought it strange she didn't have an At Home like other folks. Many young married women have two At Homes nowadays. So in the end she was persuaded. She fixed it for August because she thought so many people would be away at the seaside. But they

aren't-at least not so many as you'd think. Albert says it's owing to the General Election upset. And she wouldn't have it in the afternoon like other folks. Mrs. Edwin isn't like other folks, and you can't alter her."

"What's the matter with the evening for an At Home, anyhow?" asked Benbow the breezy and consciously broad-minded.

"Oh, of course, *I* quite agree. I like it. But folks are so funny."

After a momentary pause, Mr. Peartree said uncertainly:

"And there's a little boy?"

Said Clara:

"Yes, the one you've seen."

Said Auntie Hamps:

"Poor little thing! I do feel so sorry for him-when he grows up-"

"You needn't, Auntie," said Maggie curtly, expressing her attitude to George in that mild curtness.

"Of course," said Clara quickly. "We never let it make any difference. In fact our Bert and he are rather friends, aren't they, Albert?"

At this moment George himself opened the door of the dining-room, letting out a faint buzz of talk and clink of vessels. His mouth was not empty.

Precipitately Edwin plunged into the breakfast-room.

"Hello! You people!" he murmured. "Well, Mr. Peartree."

There they were-all of them, including the parson-grouped together, lusciously bathing in the fluid of scandal.

Clara turned, and without the least constraint said sweetly:

"Oh, Edwin! There you are! I was just telling Mr. Peartree about you and Hilda, you know. We thought it would be better."

"You see," said Auntie Hamps impressively, "Mr. Peartree will be about the town to-morrow, and a word from him-"

Mr. Peartree tried unsuccessfully to look as if he was nobody in particular.

"That's all right," said Edwin. "Perhaps the door might as well be shut." He thought, as many a man has thought: "My relations take the cake!"

Clara occupied the only easy chair in the room. Mrs. Hamps and the parson were seated. Maggie stood. Albert Benbow, ever uxorious, was perched sideways on the arm of his wife's chair. Clara, centre of the conclave and of all conclaves in which she took part, was the mother of five children, – and nearing thirty-five years of age. Maternity had ruined her once slim figure, but neither she nor Albert seemed to mind that, – they seemed rather to be proud of her unshapeliness. Her face was unspoiled. She was pretty and had a marvellously fair complexion. In her face Edwin could still always plainly see the pert, charming, malicious girl of fourteen who loathed Auntie Hamps and was rude to her behind her back. But Clara and Auntie Hamps were fast friends nowadays. Clara's brood had united them. They thought alike on all topics. Clara had accepted Auntie Hamps's code practically entire; but on the other hand she had dominated Auntie Hamps. The respect which Auntie Hamps showed for Clara and for Edwin, and in a slightly less degree for Maggie, was a strange phenomenon in the old age of that grandiose and vivacious pillar of Wesleyanism and the conventions.

Edwin did not like Clara; he objected to her domesticity, her motherliness, her luxuriant fruitfulness, the intonations of her voice, her intense self-satisfaction and her remarkable duplicity; and perhaps more than anything to her smug provinciality. He did not positively dislike his brother-in-law, but he objected to him for his uxoriousness, his cheerful assurance of Clara's perfection, his contented and conceited ignorance of all intellectual matters, his incorrigible vulgarity of a small manufacturer who displays everywhere the stigmata of petty commerce, and his ingenuous love of office. As for Maggie, the plump spinster of forty, Edwin respected her when he thought of her,

but reproached her for social gawkins and taciturnity. As for Auntie Hamps, he could not respect, but he was forced to admire, her gorgeous and sustained hypocrisy, in which no flaw had ever been found, and which victimised even herself; he was always invigorated by her ageless energy and the sight of her handsome, erect, valiant figure.

Edwin's absence had stopped the natural free course of conversation. But there were at least three people in the room whom nothing could abash: Mrs. Hamps, Clara, and Mr. Peartree.

Mr. Peartree, sitting up with his hands on his baggy knees, said:

"Everything seems to have turned out very well in the end, Mr. Clayhanger-very well, indeed." His features showed less of the tedium of life.

"Eh, yes! Eh, yes!" breathed Auntie Hamps in ecstasy.

Edwin, diffident and ill-pleased, was about to suggest that the family might advantageously separate, when George came after him into the room.

"Oh!" cried George.

"Well, little jockey!" Clara began instantly to him with an exaggerated sweetness that Edwin thought must nauseate the child, "would you like Bert to come up and play with you one of these afternoons?"

George stared at her, and slowly flushed.

"Yes," said George. "Only-"

"Only what?"

"Supposing I was doing something else when he came?"

Without waiting for possible developments George turned to leave the room again.

"You're a caution, you are!" said Albert Benbow; and to the adults: "Hates to be disturbed, I suppose."

"That's it," said Edwin responsively, as brother-in-law to brother-in-law. But he felt that he, with a few months' experience of another's child, appreciated the exquisite strange sensibility of children infinitely better than Albert were he fifty times a father.

"What is a caution, Uncle Albert?" asked George, peeping back from the door.

Auntie Hamps good-humouredly warned the child of the danger of being impertinent to his elders:

"George! George!"

"A caution is a caution to snakes," said Albert. "Shoo!" Making a noise like a rocket, he feinted to pursue the boy with violence.

Mr. Peartree laughed rather loudly, and rather like a human being, at the word "snakes." Albert Benbow's flashes of humour, indeed, seemed to surprise him, if only for an instant, out of his attitudinarianism.

Clara smiled, flattered by the power of her husband to reveal the humanity of the parson.

"Albert's so good with children," she said. "He always knows exactly..." She stopped, leaving what he knew exactly to the listeners' imagination.

Uncle Albert and George could be heard scuffling in the hall.

Auntie Hamps rose with a gentle sigh, saying:

"I suppose we ought to join the others."

Her social sense, which was pretty well developed, had at last prevailed.

The sisters Maggie and Clara, one in light and the other in dark green, walked out of the room. Maggie's face had already stiffened into mute constraint, and Clara's into self-importance, at the prospect of meeting the general company.

III

Auntie Hamps held back, and Edwin at once perceived from the conspiratorial glance in her splendid eyes that in suggesting a move she had intended to deceive her fellow-conspirator in life, Clara. But Auntie Hamps could not live without chicane. And she was happiest when she had superimposed chicane upon chicane in complex folds.

She put a ringed hand softly but arrestingly upon Edwin's arm, and pushed the door to. Alone with her and the parson, Edwin felt himself to be at bay, and he drew back before an unknown menace.

"Edwin, dear," said she, "Mr. Peartree has something to suggest to you. I was going to say 'a favour to ask,' but I won't put it like that. I'm sure my nephew will look upon it as a privilege. You know how much Mr. Peartree has at heart the District Additional Chapels Fund-"

Edwin did not know how much; but he had heard of the Macclesfield District Additional Chapels Fund, Bursley being one of the circuits in the Macclesfield District. Wesleyanism finding itself confronted with lessening congregations and with a shortage of ministers, the Macclesfield District had determined to prove that Wesleyanism was nevertheless spiritually vigorous by the odd method of building more chapels. Mr. Peartree, inventor of Saturday afternoon Bible-Classes for schoolboys, was one of the originators of the brickly scheme, and in fact his lecture upon the "Mantle and Mission of Elijah" was to be in aid of it. The next instant Mr. Peartree had invited Edwin to act as District Treasurer of the Fund, the previous treasurer having died.

More chicane! The parson's visit, then, was not a mere friendly call, inspired by the moment. It was part of a scheme. It had been planned against him. Did they (he seemed to be asking himself) think him so ingenuous, so simple, as not to see through their dodge? If not, then why the preliminary pretences? He did not really ask himself these questions, for the reason that he knew the answers to them. When a piece of chicane had succeeded Auntie Hamps forgot it, and expected others to forget it, – or at any rate she dared, by her magnificent front, anybody on earth to remind her of it. She was quite indifferent whether Edwin saw through her dodge or not.

"You're so good at business," said she.

Ah! She would insist on the business side of the matter, affecting to ignore the immense moral significance which would be attached to Edwin's acceptance of the office! Were he to yield, the triumph for Methodism would ring through the town. He read all her thoughts. Nothing could break down her magnificent front. She had cornered him by a device; she had him at bay; and she counted on his weak good-nature, on his easy-going cowardice, for a victory.

Mr. Peartree talked. Mr. Peartree expressed his certitude that Edwin was "with them at heart," and his absolute reliance upon Edwin's sense of the responsibilities of a man in his, Edwin's, position. Auntie Hamps recalled with fervour Edwin's early activities in Methodism-the Young Men's Debating Society, for example, which met at six o'clock on frosty winter mornings for the proving of the faith by dialectics.

And Edwin faltered in his speech.

"You ought to get Albert," he feebly suggested.

"Oh, no!" said Auntie. "Albert is grand in his own line. But for this, *we want a man like you.*"

It was a master-stroke. Edwin had the illusion of trembling, and yet he knew that he did not tremble, even inwardly. He seemed to see the forces of evolution and the forces of reaction ranged against each other in a supreme crisis. He seemed to see the alternative of two futures for himself-and in one he would be a humiliated and bored slave, and in the other a fine, reckless ensign of freedom. He seemed to be doubtful of his own courage. But at the bottom of his soul he was not doubtful. He remembered all the frightful and degrading ennui which when he was young he had suffered as a martyr to Wesleyanism and dogma, all the sinister deceptions which he had had to practise and which had been practised upon him. He remembered his almost life-long intense hatred of Mr. Peartree.

And he might have clenched his hands bitterly and said with homicidal animosity: "*Now* I will pay you out! And I will tell you the truth! And I will wither you up and incinerate you, and be revenged for everything in one single sentence!" But he felt no bitterness, and his animosity was dead. At the bottom of his soul there was nothing but a bland indifference that did not even scorn.

"No," he said quietly. "I shan't be your treasurer. You must ask somebody else."

A vast satisfaction filled him. The refusal was so easy, the opposing forces so negligible.

Auntie Hamps and Mr. Peartree knew nothing of the peculiar phenomena induced in Edwin's mind by the first sight of the legendary Abel Peartree after twenty years. But Auntie Hamps, though puzzled for an explanation, comprehended that she was decisively beaten. The blow was hard. Nevertheless she did not wince. The superb pretence must be kept up, and she kept it up. She smiled and, tossing her curls, checked Edwin with cheerful, indomitable rapidity.

"Now, now! Don't decide at once. Think it over very carefully, and we shall ask you again. Mr. Peartree will write to you. I feel sure..."

Appearances were preserved.

The colloquy was interrupted by Hilda, who came in excited, gay, with sparkling eyes, humming an air. She had protested vehemently against an At Home. She had said again and again that the idea of an At Home was abhorrent to her, and that she hated all such wholesale formal hospitalities and could not bear "people." And yet now she was enchanted with her situation as hostess-delighted with herself and her rich dress, almost ecstatically aware of her own attractiveness and domination. The sight of her gave pleasure and communicated zest. Mature, she was yet only beginning life. And as she glanced with secret condescension at the listless Mr. Peartree she seemed to say: "What is all this talk of heaven and hell? I am in love with life and the senses, and everything is lawful to me, and I am above you." And even Auntie Hamps, though one of the most self-sufficient creatures that ever lived, envied in her glorious decay the young maturity of sensuous Hilda.

"Well," said Hilda. "What's going on *here*? They're all gone mad about missing words in the drawing-room."

She smiled splendidly at Edwin, whose pride in her thrilled him. Her superiority to other women was patent. She made other women seem negative. In fact, she was a tingling woman before she was anything else—that was it! He compared her with Clara, who was now nothing but a mother, and to Maggie, who had never been anything at all.

Mr. Peartree made the mistake of telling her the subject of the conversation. She did not wait to hear what Edwin's answer had been.

She said curtly, and with finality:

"Oh, no! I won't have it."

Edwin did not quite like this. The matter concerned him alone, and he was an absolutely free agent. She ought to have phrased her objection differently. For example, she might have said: "I hope he has refused."

Still, his annoyance was infinitesimal.

"The poor boy works quite hard enough as it is," she added, with delicious caressing intonation of the first words.

He liked that. But she was confusing the issue. She always would confuse the issue. It was not because the office would involve extra work for him that he had declined the invitation, as she well knew.

Of course Auntie Hamps said in a flash:

"If it means overwork for him I shouldn't dream—" She was putting the safety of appearances beyond doubt.

"By the way, Auntie," Hilda continued. "What's the trouble about the pew down at chapel? Both Clara and Maggie have mentioned it."

"Trouble, my dear?" exclaimed Auntie Hamps, justifiably shocked that Hilda should employ such a word in the presence of Mr. Peartree. But Hilda was apt to be headlong.

To the pew originally taken by Edwin's father, and since his death standing in Edwin's name, Clara had brought her husband; and although it was a long pew, the fruits of the marriage had gradually filled it, so that if Edwin chanced to go to chapel there was not too much room for him in the pew, which presented the appearance of a second-class railway carriage crowded with season-ticket holders. Albert Benbow had suggested that Edwin should yield up the pew to the Benbows, and take a smaller pew for himself and Hilda and George. But the women had expressed fear lest Edwin "might not like" this break in a historic tradition, and Albert Benbow had been forbidden to put forward the suggestion until the diplomatic sex had examined the ground.

"We shall be only too pleased for Albert to take over the pew," said Hilda.

"But have you chosen another pew?" Mrs. Hamps looked at Edwin.

"Oh, no!" said Hilda lightly.

"But -"

"Now, Auntie," the tingling woman warned Auntie Hamps as one powerful individuality may warn another, "don't worry about us. You know we're not great chapel-goers."

She spoke the astounding words gaily, but firmly. She could be firm, and even harsh, in her triumphant happiness. Edwin knew that she detested Auntie Hamps. Auntie Hamps no doubt also knew it. In their mutual smilings, so affable, so hearty, so appreciative, apparently so impulsive, the hostility between them gleamed mysteriously like lightning in sunlight.

"Mrs. Edwin's family were Church of England," said Auntie Hamps, in the direction of Mr. Peartree.

"Nor great church-goers, either," Hilda finished cheerfully.

No woman had ever made such outrageous remarks in the Five Towns before. A quarter of a century ago a man might have said as much, without suffering in esteem-might indeed have earned a certain intellectual prestige by the declaration; but it was otherwise with a woman. Both Mrs. Hamps and the minister thought that Hilda was not going the right way to live down her dubious past. Even Edwin in his pride was flurried. Great matters, however, had been accomplished. Not only had the attack of Auntie Hamps and Mr. Peartree been defeated, but the defence had become an onslaught. Not only was he not the treasurer of the District Additional Chapels Fund, but he had practically ceased to be a member of the congregation. He was free with a freedom which he had never had the audacity to hope for. It was incredible! Yet there it was! A word said, bravely, in a particular tone, – and a new epoch was begun. The pity was that he had not done it all himself. Hilda's courage had surpassed his own. Women were astounding. They were disconcerting too. His manly independence was ever so little wounded by Hilda's boldness in initiative on their joint behalf.

"Do come and take something, Auntie," said Hilda, with the most winning, the most loving inflection.

Auntie Hamps passed out.

Hilda turned back into the room: "Do go with Auntie, Mr. Peartree. I must just-" She affected to search for something on the mantelpiece.

Mr. Peartree passed out. He was unmoved. He did not care in his heart. And as Edwin caught his indifferent eye, with that "it's-all-one-to-me" glint in it, his soul warmed again slightly to Mr. Peartree. And further, Mr. Peartree's aloof unworldliness, his personal practical unconcern with money, feasting, ambition, and all the grosser forms of self-satisfaction, made Edwin feel somewhat a sensual average man and accordingly humiliated him.

As soon as, almost before, Mr. Peartree was beyond the door, Hilda leaped at Edwin, and kissed him violently. The door was not closed. He could hear the varied hum of the party.

"I had to kiss you while it's all going on," she whispered. Ardent vitality shimmered in her eyes.

CHAPTER IV THE WORD

I

Ada was just crossing the hall to the drawing-room, a telegram on a salver in her red hand.

"Here you are, Ada," said Edwin, stopping her, with a gesture towards the telegram.

"It's for Mr. Tom Swetnam, sir."

Edwin and Hilda followed the starched and fussy girl into the drawing-room, in which were about a dozen people, including Fearn, the lawyer, and his wife, the recently married Stephen and Vera Cheswardine, several Swetnams, and Janet Orgreave, who sat at the closed piano, smiling vaguely.

Tom Swetnam, standing up, took the telegram.

"I never knew they delivered telegrams at this time o' night," said Fearn sharply, looking at his watch. He was wont to keep a careful eye on the organisation of railways, ships, posts, and other contrivances for the shifting of matter from one spot to another. An exacting critic of detail, he was proud of them in the mass, and called them civilisation.

"They don't," said Tom Swetnam naughtily, glad to plague a man older than himself, and the father of a family. Tom was a mere son, but he had travelled, and was, indeed, just returned from an excursion through Scandinavia. "Observe there's no deception. The envelope's been opened. Moreover, it's addressed to Ben Clewlow, not to me. Ben's sent it up. I asked him to. Now, we'll see."

Having displayed the envelope like a conjurer, he drew forth the telegram, and prepared to read it aloud. One half of the company was puzzled; the other half showed an instructed excitement. Tom read the message:

"Twenty-seven pounds ten nine. Philosophers tell us that there is nothing new under the sun. Nevertheless it may well be doubted whether the discovery of gold at Barmouth, together with two earthquake shocks following each other in quick succession in the same district, does not constitute, in the history of the gallant little Principality, a double event of unique-" He stopped.

Vera Cheswardine, pretty, fluffy, elegant, cried out with all the impulsiveness of her nature:

"Novelty!"

"Whatever is it all about?" mildly asked Mrs. Fearn, a quiet and dignified, youngish woman whom motherhood had made somewhat absent-minded when she was away from her children.

"Missing-word competition," Fearn explained to her with curt, genial superiority. He laughed outright. "You do go it, some of you chaps," he said. "Why, that telegram cost over a couple of bob, I bet!"

"Well, you see," said Tom Swetnam, "three of us share it. We get it thirty-six hours before the paper's out-fellow in London-and there's so much more time to read the dictionary. No use half doing a thing! Twenty-seven pounds odd! Not a bad share this week, eh?"

"Won anything?"

"Rather. We had the wire about the winning word this morning. We'd sent it in four times. That makes about £110, doesn't it? Between three of us. We sent in nearly two hundred postal orders. Which leaves £100 clear. Thirty-three quid apiece, net."

He tried to speak calmly and nonchalantly, but his excitement was extreme. The two younger Swetnams regarded him with awe. Everybody was deeply impressed by the prodigious figures, and in many hearts envy, covetousness, and the wild desire for a large, free life of luxury were aroused.

"Seems to me you've reduced this game to a science," said Edwin.

"Well, we have," Tom Swetnam admitted. "We send in every possible word."

"It's a mere thousand per cent profit per week," murmured Fearn. "At the rate of fifty thousand per cent per annum."

Albert Benbow, entering, caught the last phrase, which very properly whetted his curiosity as a man of business. Clara followed him closely. On nearly all ceremonial occasions these two had an instinctive need of each other's presence and support; and if Albert did not run after Clara, Clara ran after Albert.

II

Then came the proof of the genius, the cynicism and the insight of the leviathan newspaper-proprietor who had invented the dodge of inviting his readers to risk a shilling and also to buy a coupon for the privilege of supplying a missing word, upon the understanding that the shillings of those who supplied the wrong word should be taken for ever away from them and given to those who supplied the right word. The entire company in the Clayhanger drawing-room was absorbed in the tremendous missing-word topic, and listened to Swetnam as to a new prophet bearing the secret of eternal felicity. The rumour of Swetnam's triumph drew people out of the delectable dining-room to listen to his remarks; and among these was Auntie Hamps. So it was in a thousand, in ten thousand, in hundreds of thousands of homes of all kinds throughout the kingdom. The leviathan journalist's readers (though as a rule they read nothing in his paper save the truncated paragraph and the rules of the competition) had grown to be equivalent to the whole British public. And he not only held them but he had overshadowed all other interests in their minds. Upon honeymoons people thought of the missing-word amid caresses, and it is a fact that people had died with the missing word on their lips. Sane adults of both sexes read the dictionary through from end to end every week with an astounding conscientiousness. The leviathan newspaper-proprietor could not buy enough paper, nor hire sufficient presses, to meet the national demands. And no wonder, seeing that any small news-agent in a side street was liable at any moment to receive an order from an impassioned student of periodical literature for more copies of one issue of the journal than the whole town had been used to buy before the marvellous invention of the missing-word. The post office was incommoded; even the Postmaster General was incommoded, and only by heroic efforts and miraculous feats of resourcefulness did he save himself from the ignominy of running out of shilling postal orders. Post office girls sold shilling postal orders with a sarcastic smile, with acerbity, with reluctance, – it was naught to them that the revenue was benefited and the pressure on taxpayers eased. Employers throughout the islands suffered vast losses owing to the fact that for months their offices and factories were inhabited not by clerks and other employees, but by wage-paid monomaniacs who did naught but read dictionaries and cut out and fill up coupons. And over all the land there hung the dark incredible menace of an unjust prosecution under the Gambling Laws, urged by interfering busybodies who would not let a nation alone.

"And how much did you make last week, Mr. Swetnam?" judicially asked Albert Benbow, who was rather pleased and flattered, as an active Wesleyan, to rub shoulders with frank men of the world like Tom. As an active Wesleyan he had hitherto utterly refused to listen to the missing-word; but now it seemed to be acquiring respectability enough for his ears.

Swetnam replied with a casual air:

"We didn't make much last week. We won something, of course. We win every week; that's a mathematical certainty-but sometimes the expenses mount up a bit higher than the receipts. It depends on the word. If it's an ordinary word that everybody chooses, naturally the share is a small one because there are so many winners." He gave no more exact details.

Clara breathed a disillusioned "Oh!" implying that she had known there must be some flaw in the scheme-and her husband had at once put his finger on it.

But her husband, with incipient enthusiasm for the word, said: "Well, it stands to reason they must take one week with another, and average it out."

"Now, Albert! Now, Albert!" Edwin warned him. "No gambling."

Albert replied with some warmth: "I don't see that there's any gambling in it. Appears to me that it's chiefly skill and thoroughness that does the trick."

"Gambling!" murmured Tom Swetnam shortly. "Of course it's not gambling."

"No!"

"Well," said Vera Cheswardine, "I say 'novelty.' 'A double event of unique novelty.' That's it."

"I shouldn't go nap on 'novelty,' if I were you," said Tom Swetnam, the expert.

Tom read the thing again.

"Novelty," Vera repeated. "I know it's novelty. I'm always right, aren't I, Stephen?" She looked round. "Ask Stephen."

"You were right last week but one, my child," said Stephen.

"And did you make anything?" Clara demanded eagerly.

"Only fifteen shillings," said Vera discontentedly. "But if Stephen had listened to me we should have made lots."

Albert Benbow's interest in the word was strengthened.

Fearn, leaning carefully back in his chair, asked with fine indifference: "By the way, what is this week's word, Tom? I haven't your secret sources of information. I have to wait for the paper."

"Unaccountably," said Tom. "Had you anything on it?"

"No," Fearn admitted. "I've caught a cold this week, it seems."

Albert Benbow stared at him. Here was another competitor-and as acute a man of business as you would find in the Five Towns!

"Me, too!" said Edwin, smiling like a culprit.

Hilda sprang up gleefully, and pointed at him a finger of delicious censure.

"Oh! You wicked sinner! You never told me you'd gone in! You deceitful old thing!"

"Well, it was a man at the shop who would have me try," Edwin boyishly excused himself.

III

Hilda's vivacity enchanted Edwin. The charm of her reproof was simply exquisite in its good-nature and in the elegance of its gesture. The lingering taste of the feverish kiss she had given him a few minutes earlier bemused him and he flushed. To conceal his inconvenient happiness in the thought of his wife he turned to open the new enlarged window that gave on the garden. (He had done away with the old garden-entrance of the house, and thrown the side corridor into the drawing-room.) Then he moved towards Janet Orgreave, who was still seated at the closed piano.

"Your father isn't coming, I suppose?" he asked her.

The angelic spinster, stylishly dressed in white, and wearing as usual her kind heart on her sleeve, smiled with soft benignity, and shook her head.

"He told me to tell you he was too old. He is, you know."

"And how's your mother?"

"Oh, pretty well, considering... I really ought not to leave them."

"Oh, yes!" Edwin protested. The momentary vision of Mr. and Mrs. Orgreave in the large house close by, now practically deserted by all their children except Janet, saddened him.

Then a loud voice dominated the general conversation behind him:

"I say, this is a bit stiff. I did think I should be free of it here. But no! Same old missing-word everywhere! What is it this week, Swetnam?"

It was Johnnie Orgreave, appreciably younger than his sister, but a full-grown man of the world, and somewhat dandiacal. After shaking hands with Hilda he came straight to Edwin.

"Awfully sorry I'm so late, old chap. How do, Jan?"

"Of course you are," Edwin quizzed him like an uncle.

"Where's Ingpen?"

"Not come."

"Not come! He said he should be here at eight. Just like him!" said Johnnie. "I expect he's had a puncture."

"I've been looking out for him every minute," Edwin muttered.

In the middle of the room Albert Benbow, stocky and vulgar, but feeling himself more and more a man of the world among men and women of the world, was proclaiming, not without excitement:

"Well, I agree with Mrs. Cheswardine. 'Novelty' 's much more likely than 'interest.' 'Interest' 's the wrong kind of word altogether. It doesn't agree with the beginning of the paragraph."

"That's right, Mr. Benbow," Vera encouraged him with flirtatious dimples. "You put your money on me, even if my own husband won't." Albert as a dowdy dissenter was quite out of her expensive sphere, but to Vera any man was a man.

"Now, Albert," Clara warned him, "if you win anything, you must give it to me for the new perambulator."

("Dash that girl's infernal domesticity!" thought Edwin savagely.)

"Who says I'm going in for it, missis?" Albert challenged.

"I only say *if* you do, dear," Clara said smoothly.

"Then I *will*!" Albert announced the great decision. "Just for the fun of the thing, I will. Thank ye, Mrs. Cheswardine."

He glanced at Mrs. Cheswardine as a knight at his unattainable mistress. Indeed the decision had in it something of the chivalrous; the attention of slim provocative Vera, costliest and most fashionably dressed woman in Bursley, had stirred his fancy to wander far beyond its usual limits.

"Albert! Well, I never!" exclaimed Mrs. Hamps.

"You don't mind, do you Auntie?" said Albert jovially, standing over her.

"Not if it's not gambling," said Mrs. Hamps stoutly. "And I hope it isn't. And it would be very nice for Clara, I'm sure, if you won."

"Hurrah for Mrs. Hamps!" Johnnie Orgreave almost yelled.

At the same moment, Janet Orgreave, swinging round on the music-stool, lifted the lid of the piano, and, still with her soft, angelic smile, played loudly and dashingy the barbaric, Bacchic, orgiastic melody which had just recently inflamed England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and the Five Towns-the air which was unlike anything ever heard before by British ears, and which meant nothing whatever that could be avowed, the air which heralded social revolutions and inaugurated a new epoch. And as the ringed fingers of the quiet, fading spinster struck out the shocking melody, Vera Cheswardine and one or two others who had been to London and there seen the great legendary figure, Lottie Collins, hummed more or less brazenly the syllables heavy with mysterious significance:

"Tarara-boom-deay!

Tarara-boom-deay!

Tarara-boom-deay!

Tarara-boom-deay!"

Upon this entered Mr. Peartree, like a figure of retribution, and silence fell.

"I'm afraid..." he began. "Mr. Benbow."

They spoke together.

A scared servant-girl had come up from the Benbow home with the affrighting news that Bert Benbow, who had gone to bed with the other children as usual, was not in his bed and could not be discovered in the house. Mr. Peartree, being in the hall, had chosen himself to bear the grievous

tidings to the drawing-room. In an instant Albert and Clara were parents again. Both had an idea that the unprecedented, incomprehensible calamity was a heavenly dispensation to punish them for having trifled with the missing-word. Their sudden seriousness was terrific. They departed immediately, without ceremony of any sort. Mrs. Hamps said that she really ought to go too, and Maggie said that as Auntie Hamps was going she also would go. The parson said that he had already stayed longer than he ought, in view of another engagement, and he followed. Edwin and Hilda dutifully saw them off and were as serious as the circumstances demanded. But those who remained in the drawing-room sniggered, and when Hilda rejoined them she laughed. The house felt lighter. Edwin, remaining longest at the door, saw a bicyclist on one of the still quaint pneumatic-tyred "safety" bicycles, coming along behind a "King of the Road" lamp. The rider dismounted at the corner.

"That you, Mr. Ingpen?"

Said a blithe voice:

"How d'ye do, host? When you've known me a bit longer you'll learn that I always manage to arrive just when other people are leaving."

CHAPTER V

TERTIUS INGPEN

I

Tertius Ingpen was the new District Factory Inspector, a man of about thirty-five, neither fair nor dark, neither tall nor short. He was a native of the district, having been born somewhere in the aristocratic regions between Knype and the lordly village of Sneyd, but what first struck the local observer in him was that his speech had none of the local accent. In the pursuit of his vocation he had lived in other places than the Five Towns. For example, in London, where he had become acquainted with Edwin's friend, Charlie Orgreave, the doctor. When Ingpen received a goodish appointment amid the industrial horrors of his birth, Charlie Orgreave recommended him to Edwin, and Edwin and Ingpen had met once, under arrangement made by Johnnie Orgreave. It was Johnnie who had impulsively suggested in Ingpen's presence that Ingpen should be invited to the At Home. Edwin, rather intimidated by Ingpen's other-worldliness, had said: "You'll run up against a mixed lot." But Ingpen, though sternly critical of local phenomena, seemed to be ready to meet social adventures in a broad and even eager spirit of curiosity concerning mankind. He was not uncomely, and he possessed a short silky beard of which secretly he was not less proud than of his striking name. He wore a neat blue suit, with the trousers fastened tightly round the ankles for bicycle-riding, and thick kid gloves. He took off one glove to shake hands, and then, having leisurely removed the other, and talking all the time, he bent down with care and loosed his trousers and shook them into shape.

"Now what about this jigger?" he asked, while still bending. "I don't care to leave it anywhere. It's a good jigger."

As it leaned on one pedal against the kerb of Hulton Street, the strange-looking jigger appeared to be at any rate a very dirty jigger. Fastened under the saddle were a roll of paper and a mackintosh.

"There are one or two ordinaries knocking about the place," said Edwin, "but we haven't got a proper bicycle-house. I'll find a place for it somewhere in the garden." He lifted the front wheel.

"Don't trouble, please. I'll take it," said Ingpen, and before picking up the machine blew out the lamp, whose extinction left a great darkness down the slope of Hulton Street.

"You've got a very nice place here. Too central for me, of course!" Ingpen began, after they had insinuated the bicycle through narrow paths to the back of the house.

Edwin was leading him along the side of the lawn furthest away from Trafalgar Road. Certainly the property had the air of being a very nice place. The garden with its screen of high rustling trees seemed spacious and mysterious in the gloom, and the lighted windows of the house produced an effect of much richness-especially the half-open window of the drawing-room. Fearn and Cheswardine were standing in front of it chatting (doubtless of affairs) with that important adult air which Edwin himself could never successfully imitate. Behind them were bright women, and the brilliant chandelier. The piano faintly sounded. Edwin was proud of his very nice place. "How strange!" he thought. "This is all mine! These are my guests! And my wife is mine!"

"Well, you see," he answered Ingpen's criticism with false humility. "I've no choice. I've got to be central."

Ingpen answered pleasantly.

"I take your word for it; but I don't see."

The bicycle was carefully bestowed by its groping owner in a small rustic arbour which, situated almost under the wall that divided the Clayhanger property from the first cottage in Hulton Street, was hidden from the house by a clump of bushes.

In the dark privacy of this shelter Tertius Ingpen said in a reflective tone:

"I understand that you haven't been married long, and that this is a sort of function to inform the world officially that you're no longer what you were?"

"It's something like that?" Edwin admitted with a laugh.

He liked the quiet intimacy of Ingpen's voice, whose delicate inflections indicated highly cultivated sensibilities. And he thought: "I believe I shall be friends with this chap." And was glad, and faith in Ingpen was planted in his heart.

"Well," Ingpen continued, "I wish you happiness. It may seem a strange thing to say to a man in your position, but my opinion is that the proper place for women is-behind the veil. Only my personal opinion, of course! But I'm entitled to hold it, and therefore to express it." Whatever his matter, his manner was faultless.

"Yes?" Edwin murmured awkwardly. What on earth did Ingpen expect by way of reply to such a proposition? Surely Ingpen should have known that he was putting his host in a disagreeable difficulty. His new-born faith in Ingpen felt the harsh wind of experience and shivered. Nevertheless, there was a part of Edwin that responded to Ingpen's attitude. "Behind the veil." Yes, something could be said for the proposition.

They left the arbour in silence. They had not gone more than a few steps when a boy's shrill voice made itself heard over the wall of the cottage yard.

"Oh Lord, thou 'ast said 'If two on ye sh'll agray on earth as touching onything that they sh'll ask it sh'll be done for them of my Father which is in 'eaven. For where two or three are gathered together i' my name theer am I in th' midst of 'em. Oh Lord, George Edwin Clay'anger wants a two-bladed penknife. We all three on us want ye to send George Edwin Clay'anger a two-bladed penknife."

The words fell with impressive effect on the men in the garden.

"What the-" Edwin exclaimed.

"Hsh!" Ingpen stopped him in an excited whisper. "Don't disturb them for anything in the world!"

Silence followed.

Edwin crept away like a scout towards a swing which he had arranged for his friend George before he became the husband of George's mother. He climbed into it and over the wall could just see three boys' heads in the yard illuminated by a lamp in the back-window of the cottage. Tertius Ingpen joined him, but immediately climbed higher on to the horizontal beam of the swing.

"Who are they?" Ingpen asked, restraining his joy in the adventure.

"The one on the right's my stepson. The other big one is my sister Clara's child, Bert. I expect the little one's old Clowes', the gravedigger's kid. They say he's a regular little parson-probably to make up for his parents. I expect they're out somewhere having a jollification."

"Well," Ingpen breathed. "I wouldn't have missed this for a good deal." He gave a deep, almost soundless giggle.

Edwin was startled-as much as anything by the extraordinary deceitfulness of George. Who could possibly have guessed from the boy's demeanour when his Aunt Clara mentioned Bert to him, that he had made an outrageous rendezvous with Bert that very night? Certainly he had blushed, but then he often blushed. Of course, the Benbows would assert that George had seduced the guileless Bert. Fancy them hunting the town for Bert at that instant! As regards Peter Clowes, George, though not positively forbidden to do so, had been warned against associating with him-chiefly because of the bad influence which Peter's accent would have on George's accent. His mother had said that she could not understand how George could wish to be friendly with a rough little boy like Peter. Edwin, however, inexperienced as he was, had already comprehended that children, like Eastern women, have no natural class bias; and he could not persuade himself to be the first to inculcate into George ideas which could only be called snobbish. He was a democrat. Nevertheless he did not like George to play with Peter Clowes.

The small Peter, with uplifted face and clasped hands, repeated urgently, passionately:

"O God! We all three on us want ye to send George Edwin Clay'anger a two-bladed penknife. Now lads, kneel, and all three on us together!"

He stood between the taller and better-dressed boys unashamed, fervent, a born religionist. He was not even praying for himself. He was praying out of his profound impersonal interest in the efficacy of prayer.

The three boys, kneeling, and so disappearing from sight behind the wall, repeated together:

"O God! Please send George Edwin Clayhanger a two-bladed penknife."

Then George and Bert stood up again, shuffling about. Peter Clowes did not reappear.

"I can't help it," whispered Ingpen in a strange, moved voice, "I've got to be God. Here goes! And it's practically new, too!"

Edwin in the darkness could see him feeling in his waistcoat pocket, and then raise his arm, and, taking careful aim, throw in the direction of the dimly lighted yard.

"Oh!" came the cry of George, in sudden pain.

The descending penknife had hit him in the face.

There was a scramble on the pavement of the yard, and some muttered talk. The group went to the back window where the lamp was and examined the heavenly penknife. They were more frightened than delighted by the miracle. The unseen watchers in the swing were also rather frightened, as though they had interfered irremediably in a solemn and delicate crisis beyond their competence. In a curious way they were ashamed.

"Yes, and what about me?" said the voice of fat Bert Benbow, sulkily. "This is all very well. But what about me? Ye tried without me and ye couldn't do anything. Now I've come and ye've done it. What am I going to get? Ye've got to give me something instead of a half-share in that penknife, George."

George said:

"Let's pray for something for you now. What d'you want?"

"I want a bicycle. Ye know what I want."

"Oh, no, you don't, Bert Benbow!" said George. "You've got to want something safer than a bike. Suppose it comes tumbling down like the penknife did! We shall be dam well killed."

Tertius Ingpen could not suppress a snorting giggle.

"I want a bike," Bert insisted. "And I don't want nothin' else."

The two bigger boys moved vaguely away from the window, and the little religionist followed them in silence, ready to supplicate for whatever they should decide.

"All right," George agreed. "We'll pray for a bicycle. But we'd better all stand as close as we can to the wall, under the spouting, in case."

The ceremonial was recommenced.

"No," Ingpen murmured. "I'm not being God this time. It won't run to it."

Footsteps were heard on the lawn behind the swing. Ingpen slid down and Edwin jumped down. Johnnie Orgreave was approaching.

"Hsh!" Ingpen warned him.

"What are you chaps-"

"Hsh!" Ingpen was more imperative.

All three men walked away out of earshot of the yard, towards the window of the drawing-room-Johnnie Orgreave mystified, the other two smiling but with spirits disturbed. Johnnie heard the story in brief; it was told to him in confidence, as Tertius Ingpen held firmly that eavesdroppers, if they had any honour left, should at least hold their tongues.

II

When Tertius Ingpen was introduced to Hilda in the drawing-room, the three men having entered by the French window, Edwin was startled and relieved by the deportment of the orientalist who thought that the proper place for women was behind the veil. In his simplicity he had assumed that the orientalist would indicate his attitude by a dignified reserve. Not at all! As soon as Ingpen reached Hilda's hospitable gaze his whole bearing altered. He bowed, with a deferential bending that to an untravelled native must have seemed exaggerated; his face was transformed by a sweet smile; his voice became the voice of a courtier; he shook hands with chivalrous solicitude for the fragile hand shaken. Hilda was pleased by him, perceiving that this man was more experienced in the world than any of the other worldly guests. She liked that. Ingpen's new symptoms were modified after a few moments, but when he was presented to Mrs. Fearn he reproduced them in their original intensity, and again when he was introduced to Vera Cheswardine.

"Been out without your cap?" Hilda questioned Edwin, lifting her eyebrows. She said it in order to say something, for the entry of this ceremonious personage, who held all the advantages of the native and of the stranger, had a little overpowered the company.

"Only just to see after Mr. Ingpen's machine. Give me your cap, Mr. Ingpen. I'll hang it up."

When he returned to the drawing-room from the hatstand Ingpen was talking with Janet Orgreave, whom he already knew.

"Have you seen George, Edwin?" Hilda called across the drawing-room.

"Hasn't he gone to bed?"

"That's what I want to know. I haven't seen him lately."

Everyone, except Johnnie Orgreave and a Swetnam or so, was preoccupied by the thought of children, by the thought of this incalculable and disturbing race that with different standards and ideals lived so mysteriously in and among their adult selves. Nothing was said about the strange disappearance of Bert Benbow, but each woman had it in mind, and coupled it with Hilda's sudden apprehension concerning George, and imagined weird connections between the one and the other, and felt forebodings about children nearer to her own heart. Children dominated the assemblage and, made restless, the assemblage collectively felt that the moment for separation approached. The At Home was practically over.

Hilda rang the bell, and as she did so Johnnie Orgreave winked dangerously at Edwin, who with sternness responded. He wondered why he should thus deceive his wife, with whom he was so deliciously intimate. He thought also that women were capricious in their anxieties, and yet now and then their moods—once more by the favour of hazard—displayed a marvellous appositeness. Hilda had no reason whatever for worrying more about George on this night than on any other night. Nevertheless this night happened to be the night on which anxiety would be justified.

"Ada," said Hilda to the entering servant. "Have you seen Master George?"

"No'm," Ada replied, almost defiantly.

"When did you see him last?"

"I don't remember, m'm."

"Is he in bed?"

"I don't know, m'm."

"Just go and see, will you?"

"Yes'm."

The company waited with gentle, concealed excitement for the returning Ada, who announced:

"His bedroom door's locked, m'm."

"He will lock it sometimes, although I've positively forbidden him to. But what are you to do?" said Hilda, smilingly to the other mothers.

"Take the key away, obviously," Tertius Ingpen answered the question, turning quickly and interrupting his chat with Janet Orgreave.

"That ought not to be necessary," said Fearn, as an expert father.

Ada departed, thankful to be finished with the ordeal of cross-examination in a full drawing-room.

"Don't you know anything about him?" Hilda addressed Johnnie Orgreave suddenly.

"Me? About your precious? No. Why should I know?"

"Because you're getting such friends, you two."

"Oh! Are we?" Johnnie said carelessly. Nevertheless he was flattered by a certain nascent admiration on the part of George, which was then beginning to be noticeable.

A quarter of an hour later, when several guests had gone, Hilda murmured to Edwin:

"I'm not easy about that boy. I'll just run upstairs."

"I shouldn't," said Edwin.

But she did. And the distant sound of knocking, and "George, George," could be heard even down in the hall.

"I can't wake him," said Hilda, back in the drawing-room.

"What do you want to wake him for, foolish girl?" Edwin demanded.

She enjoyed being called "foolish girl," but she was not to be tranquillised.

"Do you think he is in bed?" she questioned, before the whole remaining company, and the dread suspicion was out!

After more journeys upstairs, and more bangings, and essays with keys, and even attempts at lock-picking, Hilda announced that George's room must be besieged from its window. A ladder was found, and interested visitors went into the back-entry, by the kitchen, to see it reared and hear the result. Edwin thought that the cook in the kitchen looked as guilty as he himself felt, though she more than once asseverated her belief that Master George was safely in bed. The ladder was too short. Edwin mounted it, and tried to prise himself on to the window-sill, but could not.

"Here, let me try!" said Ingpen, joyous.

Ingpen easily succeeded. He glanced through the open window into George's bedroom, and then looked down at the upturned faces, and Ada's apron, whitely visible in the gloom.

"He's here all right."

"Oh, good!" said Hilda. "Is he asleep?"

"Yes."

"He deserves to be wakened," she laughed.

"You see what a foolish girl you've been," said Edwin affectionately.

"Never mind!" she retorted. "*You* couldn't get on the window. And you were just as upset as anybody. Do you think I don't know? Thank you, Mr. Ingpen."

"Is he really there?" Edwin whispered to Ingpen as soon as he could.

"Yes. And asleep, too!"

"I wonder how the deuce he slipped in. I'll bet anything those servants have been telling a lot of lies for him. He pulls their hair down and simply does what he likes with them."

Edwin was now greatly reassured, but he could not quite recover from the glimpse he had had of George's capacity for leading a double life. Sardonicly he speculated whether the heavenly penknife would be brought to his notice by its owner, and if so by what ingenious method.

III

The final sensation was caused by the arrival, in a nearly empty drawing-room, of plump Maggie, nervous, constrained, and somewhat breathless.

"Bert has turned up," she said. "Clara thought I'd better come along and tell you. She felt sure you'd like to know."

"Well, that's all right then," Hilda replied perfunctorily, indicating that Clara's conceited assumption of a universal interest in her dull children was ridiculous.

Edwin asked:

"Did the kid say where he'd been?"

"Been running about the streets. They don't know what's come over him-because, you see, he'd actually gone to bed once. Albert is quite puzzled; but he says he'll have it out of him before he's done."

"When he does get it out of him," thought Edwin again, "there will be a family row and George will be indicted as the corrupter of innocence."

Maggie would not stay a single moment. Hilda attentively accompanied her to the hall. The former and the present mistress of the house kissed with the conventional signs of affection. But the fact that one had succeeded the other seemed to divide them. Hilda was always lying in wait for criticism from Maggie, ready to resent it; Maggie divined this and said never a word. The silence piqued Hilda as much as outspoken criticism would have annoyed her. She could not bear it.

"How do you like my new stair-carpet?" she demanded defiantly.

"Very nice! Very nice, I'm sure!" Maggie replied without conviction. And added, just as she stepped outside the front-door, "You've made a lot of changes." This was the mild, good-natured girl's sole thrust, and it was as effective as she could have wished.

Everybody had gone except the two Orgreaves and Tertius Ingpen.

"I don't know about you, Johnnie, but I must go," said Janet Orgreave when Hilda came back.

"Hold on, Jan!" Johnnie protested. "You're forgetting those duets you are to try with Ingpen."

"Really?"

"Duets!" cried Hilda, instantly uplifted and enthusiastic. "Oh, do let's have some music!"

Ingpen by arrangement with the Orgreaves had brought some pianoforte duets. They were tied to his bicycle. He was known as an amateur of music. Edwin, bidding Ingpen not to move, ran out into the garden to get the music from the bicycle. Johnnie ran after him through the French window.

"I say!" Johnnie called in a low voice.

"What's up?" Edwin stopped for him.

"I've a piece of news for you. About that land you've set your heart on, down at Shawport! ... It can be bought cheap-at least the old man says it's cheap-whatever his opinion may be worth. I was telling him about your scheme for having a new printing works altogether. Astonishing how keen he is! If I'd had a plan of the land, I believe he'd have sat down and made sketches at once."

Johnnie (with his brother Jimmie) was in partnership with old Orgreave as an architect.

"Set my heart on?" Edwin mumbled, intimidated as usual by a nearer view of an enterprise which he had himself conceived and which had enchanted him from afar. "Set my heart on?"

"Well, had you, or hadn't you?"

"I suppose I had," Edwin admitted. "Look here, I'll drop in and see you to-morrow morning."

"Right!"

Together they detached the music from the bicycle, and, as Edwin unrolled it and rolled it the other side out to flatten it, they returned silently through the dark wind-stirred garden into the drawing-room.

There were now the two Orgreaves, Tertius Ingpen, and Hilda and Edwin in the drawing-room.

"We will now begin the evening," said Ingpen, as he glanced at the music.

All five were conscious of the pleasant feeling of freedom, intimacy, and mutual comprehension which animates a small company that by self-selection has survived out of a larger one. The lateness of the hour aided their zest. Even the more staid among them perceived as by a revelation that it did not in fact matter, once in a way, if they were tired and inefficient on the morrow, and that too much regularity of habit was bad for the soul. Edwin had brought in a tray from the dining-room, and

rearranged the chairs according to Hilda's caprice, and was providing cushions to raise the bodies of the duet-players to the proper height. Janet began to excuse herself, asserting that if there was one member of her family who could not play duets, she was that member, that she had never seen this Dvorak music before, and that if they had got her brother Tom, or her elder sister Marion, or even Alicia, – etc., etc.

"We are quite accustomed to these formal preliminaries from duet-players, Miss Orgreave," said Ingpen. "I never do them myself, – not because I can play well, but because I am hardened. Now shall we start? Will you take the treble or the bass?"

Janet answered with eager modesty that she would take the bass.

"It's all one to me," said Ingpen, putting on spectacles; "I play either equally badly. You'll soon regret leaving the most important part to me. However...! Clayhanger, will you turn over?"

"Er-yes," said Edwin boldly. "But you'd better give me the tip."

He knew a little about printed music, from his experiences as a boy when his sisters used to sing two-part songs. That is to say, he had a vague idea "where a player was" on a page. But the enterprise of turning over Dvorak's "Legends" seemed to him critically adventurous. Dvorak was nothing but a name to him; beyond the correct English method of pronouncing that name, he had no knowledge whatever of the subject in hand.

Then the performance of the "Legends" began. Despite halts, hesitations, occasional loud insistent chanting of the time, explanations between the players, many wrong notes by Ingpen, and a few wrong notes by Janet, and one or two enormous misapprehensions by Edwin, the performance was a success, in that it put a spell on its public, and permitted the loose and tender genius of Dvorak to dominate the room.

"Play that again, will you?" said Hilda, in a low dramatic voice, at the third "Legend."

"We will," Ingpen answered. "And we'll play it better."

Edwin had the exquisite sensation of partially comprehending music whose total beauty was beyond the limitations of his power to enjoy-power, nevertheless, which seemed to grow each moment. Passages entirely intelligible and lovely would break at intervals through the veils of general sound and ravish him. All his attention was intensely concentrated on the page. He could hear Ingpen breathing hard. Out of the corner of his eye he was aware of Johnnie Orgreave on the sofa making signs to Hilda about drinks, and pouring out something for her, and something for himself, without the faintest noise. And he was aware of Ada coming to the open door and being waved away to bed by her mistress.

"Well," he said, when the last "Legend" was played. "That's a bit of the right sort-no mistake." He was obliged to be banal and colloquial.

Hilda said nothing at all. Johnnie, who had waited for the end in order to strike a match, showed by two words that he was an expert listener to duets. Tertius Ingpen was very excited and pleased. "More tricky than difficult, isn't it-to read?" he said privately to his fellow-performer, who concurred. Janet also was excited in her fashion. But even amid the general excitement Ingpen had to be judicious.

"Delightful stuff, of course," he said, pulling his beard. "But he's not a great composer you know, all the same."

"He'll do to be going on with," Johnnie murmured.

"Oh, yes! Delightful! Delightful!" Ingpen repeated warmly, removing his spectacles. "What a pity we can't have musical evenings regularly!"

"But we can!" said Hilda positively. "Let's have them here. Every week!"

"A great scheme!" Edwin agreed with enthusiasm, admiring his wife's initiative. He had been a little afraid that the episode of George had upset her for the night, but he now saw that she had perfectly recovered from it.

"Oh!" Ingpen paused. "I doubt if I could come every week. I could come once a fortnight."

"Well, once a fortnight then!" said Hilda.

"I suppose Sunday wouldn't suit you?"

Edwin challenged him almost fiercely:

"Why won't it suit us? It will suit us first-class."

Ingpen merely said, with quiet delicacy:

"So much the better... We might go all through the Mozart fiddle sonatas."

"And who's your violinist?" asked Johnnie.

"I am, if you don't mind." Ingpen smiled. "If your sister will take the piano part."

Hilda exclaimed admiringly:

"Do you play the violin, too, Mr. Ingpen?"

"I scrape it. Also the tenor. But my real instrument is the clarinet." He laughed. "It seems odd," he went on with genuine scientific unegotistic interest in himself. "But d'you know I thoroughly enjoy playing the clarinet in a bad orchestra whenever I get the chance. When I happen to have a free evening I often wish I could drop in at a theatre and play rotten music in the band. It's better than nothing. Some of us are born mad."

"But Mr. Ingpen," said Janet Orgreave anxiously, after this speech had been appreciated. "I have never played those Mozart sonatas."

"I am glad to hear it," he replied with admirable tranquillity. "Neither have I. I've often meant to. It'll be quite a sporting event. But of course we can have a rehearsal if you like."

The project of the musical evenings was discussed and discussed until Janet, having vanished silently upstairs, reappeared with her hat and cloak on.

"I can go alone if you aren't ready, Johnnie," said she.

Johnnie yawned.

"No. I'm coming."

"I also must go-I suppose," said Ingpen.

They all went into the hall. Through the open door of the dining-room, where one gas-jet burned, could be seen the rich remains of what had been "light refreshments" in the most generous interpretation of the term.

Ingpen stopped to regard the spectacle, fingering his beard.

"I was just wondering," he remarked, with that strange eternal curiosity about himself, "whether I'd had enough to eat. I've got to ride home."

"Well, what have you had?" Johnnie quizzed him.

"I haven't had anything," said Ingpen, "except drink."

Hilda cried.

"Oh! You poor sufferer! I am ashamed!" And led him familiarly to the table.

IV

Edwin was kept at the front-door some time by Johnnie Orgreave, who resumed as he was departing the subject of the proposed new works, and maintained it at such length that Janet, tired of waiting on the pavement, said that she would walk on. When he returned to the dining-room, Ingpen and Hilda were sitting side by side at the littered table, and the first words that Edwin heard were from Ingpen:

"It cost me a penknife. But it was dirt cheap at the price. You can't expect to be the Almighty for much less than a penknife." Seeing Edwin, he added with a nonchalant smile: "I've told Mrs. Clayhanger all about the answer to prayer. I thought she ought to know."

Edwin laughed awkwardly, saying to himself:

"Ingpen, my boy, you ought to have thought of my position first. You've been putting your finger into a rather delicate piece of mechanism. Supposing she cuts up rough with me afterwards for hiding it from her all this time! ... I'm living with her. You aren't."

"Of course," Ingpen added. "I've sworn the lady to secrecy."

Hilda said:

"I knew all the time there was something wrong."

And Edwin thought:

"No, you didn't. And if he hadn't happened to tell you about the thing, you'd have been convinced that you'd been alarming yourself for nothing."

But he only said, not certain of Hilda's humour, and anxious to placate her:

"There's no doubt George ought to be punished."

"Nothing of the kind! Nothing of the kind!" Ingpen vivaciously protested. "Why, bless my soul! The kids were engaged in a religious work. They were busy with someone far more important than any parents." And after a pause, reflectively: "Curious thing, the mentality of a child! I doubt if we understand anything about it."

Hilda smiled, but said naught.

"May I enquire what there is in that bottle?" Ingpen asked.

"Benedictine."

"Have some, Mr. Ingpen."

"I will if you will, Mrs. Clayhanger."

Edwin raised his eyebrows at his wife.

"You needn't look at me!" said Hilda. "I'm going to have some."

Ingpen smacked his lips over the liqueur.

"It's a very bad thing late at night, of course. But I believe in giving your stomach something to think about. I never allow my digestive apparatus to boss me."

"Quite right, Mr. Ingpen."

They touched glasses, without a word, almost instinctively.

"Well," thought Edwin, "for a chap who thinks women ought to be behind the veil...!"

"Be a man, Clayhanger, and have some."

Edwin shook his head.

With a scarcely perceptible movement of her glass, Hilda greeted her husband, peeping out at him as it were for a fraction of a second in a glint of affection. He was quite happy. They were all seated close together, Edwin opposite the other two at the large table. The single gas-jet, by the very inadequacy with which it lighted the scene of disorder, produced an effect of informal homeliness and fellowship that warmed the heart. Each of the three realised with pleasure that a new and promising friendship was in the making. They talked at length about the Musical Evenings, and Edwin said that he should buy some music, and Hilda asked him to obtain a history of music that Ingpen described with some enthusiasm, and the date of the first evening was settled, – Sunday week. And after uncounted minutes Ingpen remarked that he presumed he had better go.

"I have to cycle home," he announced once more.

"To-night?" Hilda exclaimed.

"No. This morning."

"All the way to Axe?"

"Oh, no! I'm three miles this side of Axe. It's only six and a half miles."

"But all those hills!"

"Pooh! Excellent for the muscles of the calf."

"Do you live alone, Mr. Ingpen?"

"I have a sort of housekeeper."

"In a cottage?"

"In a cottage."

"But what do you *do*-all alone?"

"I cultivate myself."

And Hilda, in a changed tone, said:

"How wise you are!"

"Rather inconvenient, being out there, isn't it?" Edwin suggested.

"It may be inconvenient sometimes for my job. But I can't help that. I give the State what I consider fair value for the money it pays me, and not a grain more. I've got myself to think about. There are some things I won't do, and one of them is to live all the time in a vile hole like the Five Towns. I won't do it. I'd sooner be a blooming peasant on the land."

As he was a native he had the right to criticise the district without protest from other natives.

"You're quite right as to the vile hole," said Hilda with conviction.

"I don't know-" Edwin muttered. "I think old Bosley isn't so bad."

"Yes. But you're an old stick-in-the-mud, dearest," said Hilda. "Mr. Ingpen has lived away from the district, and so have I. You haven't. You're no judge. We know, don't we, Mr. Ingpen?"

When, Ingpen having at last accumulated sufficient resolution to move and get his cap, they went through the drawing-room to the garden, they found that rain was falling.

"Never mind!" said Ingpen, lifting his head sardonically in a mute indictment of the heavens. "I have my mack."

Edwin searched out the bicycle and brought it to the window, and Hilda stuck a hat on his head. Leisurely Ingpen clipped his trousers at the ankle, and unstrapped a mackintosh cape from the machine, and folded the strap. Leisurely he put on the cape, and gazed at the impenetrable heavens again.

"I can make you up a bed, Mr. Ingpen."

"No, thanks. Oh, no, thanks! The fact is, I rather like rain."

Leisurely he took a box of fusees from his pocket, and lighted his lamp, examining it as though it contained some hidden and perilous defect. Then he pressed the tyres.

"The back tyre'll do with a little more air," he said thoughtfully. "I don't know if my pump will work."

It did work, but slowly. After which, gloves had to be assumed.

"I suppose I can get out this way. Oh! My music! Never mind, I'll leave it."

Then with a sudden access of ceremoniousness he bade adieu to Hilda; no detail of punctilio was omitted from the formality.

"Good-bye. Many thanks."

"Good-bye. Thank *you*!"

Edwin preceded the bicyclist and the bicycle round the side of the house to the front-gate at the corner of Hulton Street and Trafalgar Road.

In the solemn and chill nocturnal solitude of rain-swept Hulton Street, Ingpen straddled the bicycle, with his left foot on one raised pedal and the other on the pavement; and then held out a gloved hand to Edwin.

"Good-bye, old chap. See you soon."

Much good-will and appreciation and hope was implicit in that rather casual handshake.

He sheered off strongly down the dark slope of Hulton Street in the rain, using his ankles with skill in the pedal-stroke. The man's calves seemed to be enormously developed. The cape ballooned out behind his swiftness, and in a moment he had swerved round the flickering mournful gas-lamp at the bottom of the mean new street and was gone.

CHAPTER VI

HUSBAND AND WIFE

I

"I'm upstairs," Hilda called in a powerful whisper from the head of the stairs as soon as Edwin had closed and bolted the front-door.

He responded humorously. He felt very happy, lusty, and wideawake. The evening had had its contretemps, its varying curve of success, but as a whole it was a triumph. And, above all, it was over, – a thing that had had to be accomplished and that had been accomplished, with dignity and effectiveness. He walked in ease from room to lighted empty room, and the splendid waste of gas pleased him, arousing something royal that is at the bottom of generous natures. In the breakfast-room especially the gas had been flaring to no purpose for hours. "*Her* room, her very own room!" He wondered indulgently when, if ever, she would really make it her own room by impressing her individuality upon it. He knew she was always meaning to do something drastic to the room, but so far she had got no further than his portrait. Child! Infant! Wayward girl! ... Still the fact of the portrait on the mantelpiece touched him.

He dwelt tenderly on the invisible image of the woman upstairs. It was marvellous how she was not the Hilda he had married. The new Hilda had so overlaid and hidden the old, that he had positively to make an effort to recall what the old one was, with her sternness and her anxious air of responsibility. But at the same time she was the old Hilda too. He desired to be splendidly generous, to environ her with all luxuries, to lift her clear above other women; he desired the means to be senselessly extravagant for her. To clasp on her arm a bracelet whose cost would keep a workingman's family for three years would have delighted him. And though he was interested in social schemes, and had a social conscience, he would sooner have bought that bracelet, and so purchased the momentary thrill of putting it on her capricious arm, than have helped to ameliorate the lot of thousands of victimised human beings. He had Hilda in his bones and he knew it, and he knew that it was a grand and a painful thing.

Nevertheless he was not without a considerable self-satisfaction, for he had done very well by Hilda. He had found her at the mercy of the world, and now she was safe and sheltered and beloved, and made mistress of a house and home that would stand comparison with most houses and homes. He was proud of his house; he always watched over it; he was always improving it; and he would improve it more and more; and it should never be quite finished.

The disorder in it, now, irked him. He walked to and fro, and restored every piece of furniture to its proper place, heaped the contents of the ash-trays into one large ash-tray, covered some of the food, and locked up the alcohol. He did this leisurely, while thinking of the woman upstairs, and while eating two chocolates, – not more, because he had notions about his stomach. Then he shut and bolted the drawing-room window, and opened the door leading to the cellar steps and sniffed, so as to be quite certain that the radiator furnace was not setting the house on fire. And then he extinguished the lights, and the hall-light last of all, and his sole illumination was the gas on the first-floor landing inviting him upstairs.

Standing on the dark stairs, on his way to bed, eager and yet reluctant to mount, he realised the entity of the house. He thought of the astounding and mysterious George, and of those uncomprehended beings, Ada and the cook in their attic, sleeping by the side of the portrait of a fireman in uniform. He felt sure that one or both of them had been privy to George's unlawful adventures, and he heartily liked them for shielding the boy. And he thought of his wife, moving about

in the bedroom upon which she *had* impressed her individuality. He went upstairs... Yes, he should proceed with the enterprise of the new works. He had the courage for it now. He was rich, according to Bursley ideas, – he would be far richer... He gave a faint laugh at the memory of George's objection to Bert's choice of a bicycle as a gift from heaven.

II

Hilda was brushing her hair. The bedroom seemed to be full of her and the disorder of her multitudinous things. Whenever he asked why a particular item of her goods was in a particular spot-the spot appearing to him to have been bizarrely chosen-she always proved to her own satisfaction, by a quite improvised argument, that that particular spot was the sole possible spot for that particular item. The bedroom was no longer theirs-it was hers. He picnicked in it. He didn't mind. In fact he rather liked the picnic. It pleased him to exercise his talent for order and organisation, so as to maintain his own comfort in the small spaces which she left to him. To-night the room was in a divine confusion. He accepted it with pleasure. The beds had not been turned down, because it was improper to turn them down when they were to be used for the deposit of strangers' finery. On Edwin's bed now lay the dress which Hilda had taken off. It was a most agreeable object on the bed, and seemed even richer and more complex there than on Hilda. He removed it carefully to a chair. An antique diaphanous shawl remained, which was unfamiliar to him.

"What's this shawl?" he asked. "I've never seen this shawl before. What is it?"

Hilda was busy, her bent head buried in hair.

"Oh, Edwin, what an old fusser you are!" she mumbled. "What shawl?"

He held it up.

"Someone must have left it."

He proceeded with the turning down of his bed. Then he sat on a chair to regard Hilda.

When she had done her hair she padded across the room and examined the shawl.

"What a precious thing!" she exclaimed. "It's Mrs. Fearn's. She must have taken it off to put her jacket on, and then forgotten it. But I'd no idea how good it was. It's genuine old. I wonder how it would suit me?"

She put it round her shoulders, and then stood smiling, posing, bold, provocative, for his verdict. The whiteness of her *deshabille* showed through the delicate pattern and tints of the shawl, with a strange effect. For him she was more than a woman; she was the incarnation of a sex. It was marvellous how all she did, all her ideas and her gestures, were so intensely feminine, so sure to perturb or enchant him. Nervously he began to wind his watch. He wanted to spring up and kiss her because she was herself. But he could not. So he said:

"Come here, chit. Let me look at that shawl."

She obeyed. She knelt acquiescent. He put his watch back into his pocket, and fingered the shawl.

Then she said:

"I suppose one'll be allowed to grumble at Georgie for locking his bedroom door." And she said it with a touch of mockery in her clear, precise voice, as though twitting him, and Ingpen too, about their absurd theoretical sense of honour towards children. And there was a touch of fine bitterness in her voice also, – a reminiscence of the old Hilda. Incalculable creature! Who could have guessed that she would make such a remark at such a moment? In his mind he dashed George to pieces. But as a wise male he ignored all her implications and answered casually, mildly, with an affirmative.

She went on:

"What were you talking such a long time to Johnnie Orgreave about?"

"Talking a long time to Johnnie Orgreave? Oh! D'you mean at the front-door? Why, it wasn't half a minute! He happened to mention a piece of land down at Shawport that I had a sort of a notion of buying."

"Buying? What for?" Her tone hardened.

"Well, supposing I had to build a new works?"

"You never told me anything about it."

"I've only just begun to think of it myself. You see, if I'm to go in for lithography as it ought to be gone in for, I can't possibly stay at the shop. I must have more room, and a lot more. And it would be cheaper to build than to rent."

She stood up.

"Why go in more for lithography?"

"You can't stand still in business. Must either go forward or go back."

"It seems to me it's very risky. I wondered what you were hiding from me."

"My dear girl, I was not hiding anything from you," he protested.

"Whose land is it?"

"It belongs to Tobias Hall's estate."

"Yes, and I've no doubt the Halls would be very glad to get rid of it. Who told you about it?"

"Johnnie."

"Of course it would be a fine thing for him too."

"But I'd asked him if he knew of any land going cheap."

She shrugged her shoulders, and shrugged away the disinterestedness of all Orgreaves.

"Anyone could get the better of you," she said.

He resented this estimate of himself as a good-natured simpleton. He assuredly did not want to quarrel, but he was obliged to say:

"Oh! Could they?"

An acerbity scarcely intentional somehow entered into his tone. As soon as he heard it he recognised the tone as the forerunner of altercations.

"Of course!" she insisted, superiorly, and then went on: "We're all right as we are. We spend too much money, but I daresay we're all right. If you go in for a lot of new things you may lose all we've got, and then where shall we be?"

In his heart he said to her:

"What's it got to do with you? You manage your home, and I'll manage my business! You know nothing at all about business. You're the very antithesis of business. Whatever business you've ever had to do with you've ruined. You've no right to judge and no grounds for judgment. It's odious of you to asperse any of the Orgreaves. They were always your best friends. I should never have met you if it hadn't been for them. And where would you be now without me? Trying to run some wretched boarding-house and probably starving. Why do you assume that I'm a d-d fool? You always do. Let me tell you that I'm one of the most common-sense men in this town, and everybody knows it except you. Anyhow I was clever enough to get *you* out of a mess... You knew I was hiding something from you, did you? I wish you wouldn't talk such infernal rot. And moreover I won't have you interfering in my business. Other wives don't, and you shan't. So let that be clearly understood." In his heart he was very ill-used and very savage.

But he only said:

"Well, we shall see."

She retorted:

"Naturally if you've made up your mind, there's no more to be said."

He broke out viciously:

"I've not made up my mind. Don't I tell you I've only just begun to think about it?"

He was angry. And now that he actually was angry, he took an almost sensual pleasure in being angry. He had been angry before, though on a smaller scale, with less provocation, and he had sworn that he would never be angry again. But now that he was angry again, he gloomily and fiercely revelled in it.

Hilda silently folded up the shawl, and, putting it into a drawer of the wardrobe, shut the drawer with an irritatingly gentle click... Click! He could have killed her for that click... She seized a dressing-gown.

"I must just go and look at George," she murmured, with cool, clear calmness, – the virtuous, anxious mother; not a trace of coquetry anywhere in her.

"What bosh!" he thought. "She knows perfectly well George's door is bolted."

Marriage was a startling affair. Who could have foretold this finish to the evening? Nothing had occurred ... nothing ... and yet everything. His plans were all awry. He could see naught but trouble.

She was away some time. When she returned, he was in bed, with his face averted. He heard her moving about.

"Will she, or won't she, come and kiss me?" he thought.

She came and kissed him, but it was a meaningless kiss.

"Good-night," she said, aloofly.

"Night."

She slept. But he could not sleep. He kept thinking the same thought: "She's no right whatever... I must say I never bargained for this..." etc.

CHAPTER VII

THE TRUCE

I

Nearly a week passed. Hilda, in the leisure of a woman of fashion after dinner, was at the piano in the drawing-room. She had not urgent stockings to mend, nor jam to make, nor careless wenches to overlook, nor food to buy, nor accounts to keep, nor a new dress to scheme out of an old one, nor to perform her duty to her neighbour. She had nothing to do. Like Edwin, she could not play the piano, but she had picked up a note here and a note there in the course of her life, and with much labour and many slow hesitations she could puzzle out a chord or a melody from the printed page. She was now exasperatingly spelling with her finger a fragment of melody from one of Dvorak's "Legends," – a fragment that had inhabited her mind since she first heard it, and that seemed to gather up and state all the sweet heart-breaking intolerable melancholy implicit in the romantic existence of that city on the map, Prague. On the previous day she had been a quarter of an hour identifying the unforgettable, indissmissible fragment amid the multitude of notes. Now she had recognisably pieced its phrases together, and as her stiff finger stumbled through it, her ears heard it, once more; and she could not repeat it often enough. What she heard was not what she was playing but something finer, – her souvenir of what Tertius Ingpen had played; and something finer than that, something finer than the greatest artist could possibly play-magic!

It was in the nature of a miracle to her that she had been able to reproduce the souvenir in physical sound. She was proud of herself as a miracle-worker, and somewhat surprised. And at the same time she was abject because she "could not play the piano." She thought that she would be ready to sacrifice many happinesses in order to be able to play as well as even George played, that she would exchange all her own gifts multiplied by a hundred in order to be able to play as Janet Orgreave played, and that to be a world-renowned pianist dominating immense audiences in European capitals must mean the summit of rapture and glory. (She had never listened to a world-renowned pianist.) Meanwhile, without the ennui and slavery of practice, she was enchanting herself; and she savoured her idleness, and thought of her young pretty servants at work, and her boy loose and at large, and her husband keeping her, and of the intensity of beautiful sorrow palpitating behind the mediæval façades of Prague. Had Ingpen overheard her, he might have demanded: "Who is making that infernal noise on the piano?"

Edwin came into the room, holding a thick green book. He ought long ago to have been back at the works (or "shop," as it was still called, because it had once been principally a shop), keeping her.

"Hello!" she murmured, without glancing away from the piano. "I thought you were gone."

They had not quarrelled; but they had not made peace; and the open question of lithography and the new works still separated them. Sometimes they had approached each other, pretending amiably or even affectionately that there was no open question. But the reality of the question could not be destroyed by any pretence of ignoring it.

While gazing at the piano, Hilda could also see Edwin. She thought she knew him, but she was always making discoveries in this branch of knowledge. Now and then she was so bewildered by discoveries that she came to wonder why she had married him, and why people do marry-really! The fact was that she had married him for the look in his eyes. It was a sad look, and beyond that it could not be described. Also, a little, she had married him for his bright untidy hair, and for that short oblique shake of the head which with him meant a greeting or an affirmative. She had not married him for his sentiments nor for his goodness of heart. Some points in him she did not like. He had a

tendency to colds, and she hated him whenever he had a cold. She often detested his terrible tidiness, though it was a convenient failing. More and more she herself wilfully enjoyed being untidy, as her mother had been untidy... And to think that her mother's untidiness used to annoy her! On the other hand she found pleasure in humouring Edwin's crotchettiness in regard to the details of a meal. She did not like his way of walking, which was ungainly, nor his way of standing, which was infirm. She preferred him to be seated. She could not but regret his irresolution, and his love of ease. However, the look in his eyes was paramount, because she was in love with him. She knew that he was more deeply and helplessly in love with her than she with him, but even she was perhaps tightlier bound than in her pride she thought.

Her love had the maladies of a woman's love when it is great; these may possibly be also the maladies of a man's love. It could be bitter. Certainly it could never rest from criticism, spoken or unspoken. In the presence of others she would criticise him to herself, if not aloud, nearly all the time; the ordeal was continuous. When she got him alone she would often endow him at a stroke with perfection, and her tenderness would pour over him. She trusted him profoundly; and yet she had constant misgivings, which weakened or temporarily destroyed her confidence. She would treat a statement from him with almost hostile caution, and accept blindly the very same statement from a stranger! Her habit was to assume that in any encounter between him and a stranger he would be worsted. She was afraid for him. She felt that she could protect him better than he could protect himself, – against any danger whatever. This instinct to protect him was also the instinct of self-protection; for peril to him meant peril to her. And she had had enough of peril. After years of disastrous peril she was safe and George was safe. And if she was passionately in love with Edwin, she was also passionately in love with safety. She had breathed a long sigh of relief, and from a desperate self-defender had become a woman. She lay back, as it were, luxuriously on a lounge, after exhausting and horrible exertions; she had scarcely ceased to pant. At the least sign of recurring danger all her nerves were on the *qui vive*. Hence her inimical attitude towards the project of the new works and the extension of lithography in Bursley. The simpleton (a moment earlier the perfect man) might ruin himself-and her! In her view he was the last person to undertake such an enterprise.

Since her marriage, Clara, Maggie, and Auntie Hamps had been engaged in the pleasant endless task of telling her all about everything that related to the family, and she had been permitted to understand that Edwin, though utterly admirable, was not of a creative disposition, and that he had done nothing but conserve what his father had left. Without his father Edwin "would have been in a very different position." She believed this. Every day, indeed, Edwin, by the texture of his hourly life, proved the truth of it... All the persons standing to make a profit out of the new project would get the better of his fine ingenuous temperament-naturally! She knew the world. Did Edwin suppose that she did not know what the world was? ... And then the interminable worry of the new enterprise-misgivings, uncertainties, extra work, secret preoccupations! What room for love, what hope of tranquillity in all that? He might argue- But she did not want to argue; she would not argue. She was dead against the entire project. He had not said to her that it was no affair of hers, but she knew that such was his thought, and she resented the attitude. No affair of hers? When it threatened her felicity? No! She would not have it. She was happy and secure. And while lying luxuriously back in her lounge she would maintain all the defences of her happiness and her security.

II

Holding the green book in front of her, Edwin said quietly:

"Read this!"

"Which?"

He pointed with his finger.

She read:

*"I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contained.
I stand and look at them long and long.
They do not sweat and whine about their condition.
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins.
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God.
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things.
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago.
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth."*

Edwin had lately been exciting himself, not for the first time, over Walt Whitman.

"Fine, isn't it?" he said, sure that she would share his thrill.

"Magnificent!" she agreed with quiet enthusiasm. "I must read more of that." She gazed over the top of the book through the open blue-curtained window into the garden.

He withdrew the book and closed it.

"You haven't got that tune exactly right, you know," he said, jerking his head in the direction of the music.

"Oh!" She was startled. What did he know about it? He could not play the piano.

"Where are you?" he asked. "Show me. Where's the confounded place on the piano? Well! At the end you play it like this." He imitated her. "Whereas it ought to be like this." He played the last four notes differently.

"So it ought!" She murmured with submission, after having frowned.

"That bit of a tune's been running in my head, too," he said.

The strange beauty of Whitman and the strange beauty of Dvorak seemed to unite, and both Edwin and Hilda were uplifted, not merely by these mingled beauties, but by their realisation of the wondrous fact that they both took intense pleasure in the same varied forms of beauty. Happiness rose about them like a sweet smell in the spaces of the comfortable impeccable drawing-room. And for a moment they leaned towards each other in bliss-across the open question... Was it still open? ... Ah! Edwin might be ingenuous, a simpleton, but Hilda admitted the astounding, mystifying adroitness of his demeanour. Had he abandoned the lithographic project, or was he privately nursing it? In his friendliness towards herself was there a reserve, or was there not? She knew ... she did not know ... she knew... Yes, there was a reserve, but it was so infinitesimal that she could not define it, – could not decide whether it was due to obstinacy of purpose, or merely to a sense of injury, whether it was resentful or condescending. Exciting times! And she perceived that her new life was gradually getting fuller of such excitements.

"Well," said he. "It's nearly three. Quarter-day's coming along. I'd better be off down and earn a bit towards Maggie's rent."

Before the June quarter-day, he had been jocular in the same way about Maggie's rent. In the division of old Darius Clayhanger's estate Maggie had taken over the Clayhanger house, and Edwin paid rent to her therefor.

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that," said Hilda, pouting amiably.

"Why not?"

"Well, I wish you wouldn't."

"Anyhow, the rent has to be paid, I suppose."

"And I wish it hadn't. I wish we didn't live in Maggie's house."

"Why?"

"I don't like the idea of it."

"You're sentimental."

"You can call it what you like. I don't like the idea of us living in Maggie's house. I never feel as if I was at home. No, I don't feel as if I was at home."

"What a kid you are!"

"You won't change me," she persisted stoutly.

He knew that she was not sympathetic towards the good Maggie. And he knew the reasons for her attitude, though they had never been mentioned. One was mere vague jealousy of Maggie as her predecessor in the house. The other was that Maggie was always very tepid towards George. George had annoyed her on his visits previous to his mother's marriage, and moreover Maggie had dimly resented Edwin's interest in the son of a mysterious woman. If she had encountered George after the proclamation of Edwin's engagement she would have accepted the child with her customary cheerful blandness. But she had encountered him too soon, and her puzzled gaze had said to George: "Why is my brother so taken up with you? There must be an explanation, and your strange mother is the explanation." Edwin did not deny Maggie's attitude to George, but he defended Maggie as a human being. Though dull, "she was absolutely the right sort," and the very slave of duty and loyalty. He would have liked to make Hilda see all Maggie's excellences.

"Do you know what I've been thinking?" Hilda went on. "Suppose you were to buy the house from Maggie? Then it would be ours."

He answered with a smile:

"What price 'the mania for owning things'? ... Would you like me to?" There was promise in his roguish voice.

"Oh! I should. I've often thought of it," she said eagerly. And at the same time all her gestures and glances seemed to be saying: "Humour me! I appeal to you as a girl pouting and capricious. But humour me. You know it gives you pleasure to humour me. You know you like me not to be too reasonable. We both know it. I want you to do this."

It was not the fact that she had often thought of the plan. But in her eagerness she imagined it to be the fact. She had never seriously thought of the plan until that moment, and it appeared doubly favourable to her now, because the execution of it, by absorbing capital, ought to divert Edwin from his lithographic project, and perhaps render the lithographic project impossible for years.

She added, aloud:

"Then you wouldn't have any rent to pay."

"How true!" said Edwin, rallying her. "But it would stand me in a loss, because I should have to pay too much for the place."

"Why?" she cried, in arms. "Why should Maggie ask too much just because you want it? And think of all the money you've spent on it!"

"The money spent on it only increases its value to Maggie. You don't seem to understand landlordism, my child. But that's not the point at all. Maggie won't ask any price. Only I couldn't decently pay her less than the value she took the house over at when we divided up. To wit, £1,800. It ain't worth that. I only pay £60 rent."

"If she took it over at too high a value that's her look-out," said the harsh and unjust Hilda.

"Not at all. She was a fool. Albert and Clara persuaded her. It was a jolly good thing for them. I couldn't very well interfere."

"It seems a great shame you should have to pay for what Albert and Clara did."

"I needn't unless I want to. Only, if I buy the house, £1,800 will have to be the price."

"Well," said Hilda. "I wish you'd buy it."

"Would she feel more at home if he did?" he seductively chaffed her.

"Yes, she would." Hilda straightened her shoulders, and smiled with bravado.

"And suppose Mag won't sell?"

"Will you allow me to mention it to her?" Hilda's submissive tone implied that Edwin was a tyrant who ruled with a nod.

"I don't mind," he said negligently.

"Well, one of these days I just will."

Edwin departed, leaving the book behind. Hilda was flushed. She thought: "It is marvellous. I can do what I like with him. When I use a particular tone, and look at him in a particular way, I can do what I like with him."

She was ecstatically conscious of an incomprehensible power. What a rôle, that of the capricious, pouting queen, reclining luxuriously on her lounge, and subduing a tyrant to a slave! It surpassed that of the world-renowned pianist!..

III

But soon she became more serious. She had a delicious glow of seriousness. She overflowed with gratitude to Edwin. His good-nature was exquisite. He was not perfect. She could see all his faults just as plainly as when she was angry with him. But he was perfect in loveliness. She adored every aspect of him, every manifestation of his character. She felt her responsibility to him and to George. It was hers to bring grace into their lives. Without her, how miserable, how uncared for, those two would be! They would be like lost children. Nobody could do for them what she did. Money could not buy what she gave naturally, and mere invention could not devise it. She looked up to Edwin, but at the same time she was mysteriously above both him and George. She had a strange soft wisdom for them. It was agreeable, and it was proper, and it was even prudent, to be capricious on occasion and to win by pouting and wiles and seductions; but beneath all that lay the tremendous sternness of the wife's duty, everlasting and intricate, a heavy obligation that demanded all her noblest powers for its fulfilment. She rose heroically to the thought of duty, conceiving it as she had never conceived it before. She desired intensely to be the most wonderful wife in the whole history of marriage. And she believed strongly in her capabilities.

She went upstairs to put on another and a finer dress; for since the disastrous sequel to the At Home she had somewhat wearied in the pursuit of elegance. She had thought: "What is the use of me putting myself to such a lot of trouble for a husband who is insensible enough to risk my welfare unnecessarily?" She was now ashamed of this backsliding. Ada was in the bedroom finicking with something on the dressing-table. Ada sprang to help as soon as she knew that her mistress had to go out. And she openly admired the new afternoon dress and seemed as pleased as though she was to wear it herself. And Ada buttoned her boots and found her gloves and her parasol, and remembered her purse and her bag and her handkerchief.

"I don't quite know what time I shall be back, Ada."

"No'm," said Ada eagerly, as though saying: "Of course you don't, m'm. You have many engagements. But no matter when you come back we shall be delighted to see you because the house is nothing without you."

"Of course I shall be back for tea."

"Oh, yes'm!" Ada agreed, as though saying: "Need you tell me that, m'm? I know you would never leave the master to have his tea alone."

Hilda walked regally down the stairs and glanced round about her at the house, which belonged to Maggie and which Edwin had practically promised to buy. Yes, it was a fine house, a truly splendid abode. And it seemed all the finer because it was Maggie's. Hilda had this regrettable human trait of overvaluing what was not hers and depreciating what was. It accounted in part, possibly, for her often very critical attitude towards Edwin. She passed out of the front-door in triumph, her head full of wise schemes and plots. But even then she was not sure whether she had destroyed-or could ever destroy, by no matter what arts! – the huge dangerous lithographic project.

As soon as she was gone, Ada ran yelling to the kitchen:

"Hooray! She's safe."

And both servants burst like infants into the garden, to disport themselves upon the swing.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FAMILY AT HOME

I

When Hilda knocked at the door of Auntie Hamps's house, in King Street, a marvellously dirty and untidy servant answered the summons, and a smell of greengage jam in the making surged out through the doorway into the street. The servant wore an apron of rough sacking.

"Is Miss Clayhanger in?" coldly asked Hilda, offended by the sight and the smell.

The servant looked suspicious and mysterious.

"No, mum. Her's gone out."

"Mrs. Hamps, then?"

"Missis is up yon," said the servant, jerking her tousled head back towards the stairs.

"Will you tell her I'm here?"

The servant left the visitor on the doorstep, and with an elephantine movement of the knees ran upstairs.

Hilda walked into the passage towards the kitchen. On the kitchen fire was the brilliant copper pan sacred to "preserving." Rows of earthenware and glass jars stood irregularly on the table.

"Her'll be down," said the brusque servant, returning, and glared open-mouthed.

"Shall I wait in the sitting-room?"

The house, about seventy years old, was respectably situated in the better part of King Street, at the bottom of the slope near St. Luke's Church. It had once been occupied by a dentist of a certain grandeur, and possessed a garden, of which, however, Auntie Hamps had made a wilderness. The old lady was magnificent, but her magnificence was limited to herself. She could be sublimely generous, gorgeously hospitable, but only upon special occasions. Her teas, at which a fresh and costly pineapple and wonderful confectionery and pickled salmon and silver plate never lacked, were renowned, but the general level of her existence was very mean. Her servants, of whom she had many, though never more than one at a time, were not only obliged to be Wesleyan Methodists and to attend the Sunday night service, and in the week to go to class-meeting for the purpose of confessing sins and proving the power of Christ, – they were obliged also to eat dripping instead of butter. The mistress sometimes ate dripping, if butter ran short or went up in price. She considered herself a tremendous housewife. She was a martyr to her housewifely ideals. Her private career was chiefly an endless struggle to keep the house clean-to get forward with the work. The house was always going to be clean and never was, despite eternal soap, furniture-polish, scrubbing, rubbing. Auntie Hamps never changed her frowsy house-dress for rich visiting attire without the sad thought that she was "leaving something undone." The servant never went to bed without hearing the discontented phrase: "Well, we must do it to-morrow." Spring-cleaning in that house lasted for six weeks. On days of hospitality the effort to get the servant "dressed" for tea-time was simply desperate, and not always successful.

Auntie Hamps had no sense of comfort and no sense of beauty. She was incapable of leaning back in a chair, and she regarded linoleum as one of the most satisfactory inventions of the modern age. She "saved" her carpets by means of patches of linoleum, often stringy at the edges, and in some rooms there was more linoleum than anything else. In the way of renewals she bought nothing but linoleum, – unless some chapel bazaar forced her to purchase a satin cushion or a hand-painted grate-screen. All her furniture was old, decrepit and ugly; it belonged to the worst Victorian period, when every trace of the eighteenth century had disappeared. The abode was always oppressive. It was oppressive even amid hospitality, for then the mere profusion on the tables accused the rest of the

interior, creating a feeling of discomfort; and moreover Mrs. Hamps could not be hospitable naturally. She could be nothing and do nothing naturally. She could no more take off her hypocrisy than she could take off her skin. Her hospitality was altogether too ruthless. And to satisfy that ruthlessness, the guests had always to eat too much. She was so determined to demonstrate her hospitality to herself, that she would never leave a guest alone until he had reached the bursting point.

Hilda sat grimly in the threadbare sitting-room amid morocco-bound photograph albums, oleographs, and beady knickknacks, and sniffed the strong odour of jam; and in the violence of her revolt against that wide-spread messy idolatrous eternal domesticity of which Auntie Hamps was a classic example, she protested that she would sooner buy the worst jam than make the best, and that she would never look under a table for dust, and that naught should induce her to do any housework after midday, and that she would abolish spring-cleaning utterly.

The vast mediocre respectability of the district weighed on her heart. She had been a mistress-drudge in Brighton during a long portion of her adult life; she knew the very depths of domesticity; but at Brighton the eye could find large, rich, luxurious, and sometimes beautiful things for its distraction; and there was the sea. In the Five Towns there was nothing. You might walk from one end of the Five Towns to the other, and not see one object that gave a thrill-unless it was a pair of lovers. And when you went inside the houses you were no better off, – you were even worse off, because you came at once into contact with an ignoble race of slatternly imprisoned serfs driven by narrow-minded women who themselves were serfs with the mentality of serfs and the prodigious conceit of virtue... Talk to Auntie Hamps at home of lawn-tennis or a musical evening, and she would set you down as flighty, and shift the conversation on to soaps or chapels. And there were hundreds of houses in the Five Towns into which no ideas save the ideas of Auntie Hamps had ever penetrated, and tens and hundreds of thousands of such houses all over the industrial districts of Staffordshire, Cheshire, Lancashire, and Yorkshire, – houses where to keep bits of wood clean and to fulfil the ceremonies of pietism, and to help the poor to help themselves, was the highest good, the sole good. Hilda in her mind saw every house, and shuddered. She turned for relief to the thought of her own house, and in a constructive spirit of rebellion she shaped instantaneously a conscious policy for it... Yes, she took oath that her house should at any rate be intelligent and agreeable before it was clean. She pictured Auntie Hamps gazing at a layer of dust in the Clayhanger hall, and heard herself saying: "Oh, yes, Auntie, it's dust right enough. I keep it there on purpose, to remind me of something I want to remember." She looked round Auntie Hamps's sitting-room and revelled grimly in the monstrous catalogue of its mean ugliness.

And then Auntie Hamps came in, splendidly and yet soberly attired in black to face the world, with her upright, vigorous figure, her sparkling eye, and her admirable complexion; self-content, smiling hospitably; quite unconscious that she was dead, and that her era was dead, and that Hilda was not guiltless of the murder.

"This is nice of you, Hilda. It's quite an honour." And then, archly: "I'm making jam."

"So I see," said Hilda, meaning that so she smelt. "I just looked in on the chance of seeing Maggie."

"Maggie went out about half-an-hour ago."

Auntie Hamps's expression had grown mysterious. Hilda thought: "What's she hiding from me?"

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter," said she. "You're going out too, Auntie."

"I do wish I'd known you were coming, dear. Will you stay and have a cup of tea?"

"No, no! I won't keep you."

"But it will be a *pleasure*, dear," Auntie Hamps protested warmly.

"No, no! Thanks! I'll just walk along with you a little of the way. Which direction are you going?"

Auntie Hamps hesitated, she was in a dilemma.

"What *is* she hiding from me?" thought Hilda.

"The truth is," said Auntie Hamps, "I'm just popping over to Clara's."

"Well, I'll go with you, Auntie."

"Oh, do!" exclaimed Mrs. Hamps almost passionately. "Do! I'm sure Clara will be delighted!" She added in a casual tone: "Maggie's there."

Thought Hilda:

"She evidently doesn't want me to go."

After Mrs. Hamps had peered into the grand copper pan and most particularly instructed the servant, they set off.

"I shan't be easy in my mind until I get back," said Auntie Hamps. "Unless you look after them all the time they always forget to stir it."

II

When they turned in at the gate of the Benbows' house the front-door was already open, and Clara, holding Rupert-her youngest-by the hand, stood smiling to receive them. Obviously they had been descried up the street from one of the bow-windows. This small fact, strengthening in Hilda's mind the gradually-formed notion that the Benbows were always lying in wait and that their existence was a vast machination for getting the better of other people, enlivened her prejudice against her sister-in-law. Moreover Clara was in one of her best dresses, and her glance had a peculiar self-conscious expression, partly guilty and partly cunning. Nevertheless, the fair fragility of Clara's face, with its wonderful skin, and her manner, at once girlish and maternal, of holding fast the child's hand, reacted considerably against Hilda's prejudice.

Rupert was freshly all in white, stitched and embroidered with millions of plain and fancy stitches; he had had time neither to tear nor to stain; only on his bib there was a spot of jam. His obese right arm was stretched straight upwards to attain the immense height of the hand of the protective giantess his mother, and this reaching threw the whole balance of his little body over towards the left, and gave him a comical and wistful appearance. He was a pretty and yet sturdy child, with a look indicating a nice disposition, and he had recently been acquiring the marvellous gift of speech... Astounding how the infantile brain added word to word and phrase to phrase, and (as though there were not enough) actually invented delicious words and graphic droll phrases! Nobody could be surprised that he became at once the centre of greetings. His grand-aunt snatched him up, and without the slightest repugnance he allowed the ancient woman to bury her nose in his face and neck.

And then Hilda embraced him with not less pleasure, for the contact of his delicate flesh, and his flushed timid smile, were exquisite. She wished for a moment that George was only two and a half again, and that she could bathe him, and wipe him, and nurse him close. Clara's pride, though the visitors almost forgot to shake hands with her, was ecstatic. At length Rupert was safely on the step once more. He had made no remark whatever. Shyness prevented him from showing off his new marvellous gift, but his mother, gazing at him, said that in ordinary life he never stopped chattering.

"Come this way, will you?" said Clara effusively, and yet conspiratorially, pointing to the drawing-room, which was to the left of the front-door. From the dining-room, which was to the right of the front-door, issued confused sounds. "Albert's here. I'm so glad you've come," she added to Hilda.

Auntie Hamps murmured warningly into Hilda's ear:

"It's Bert's birthday party."

A fortnight earlier Hilda had heard rumours of Bert's approaching birthday-his twelfth, and therefore a high solemnity-but she had very wrongly forgotten about it. "I'm so glad you've come," Clara repeated in the drawing-room. "I was afraid you might be hurt. I thought I'd just bring you in here first and explain it all to you."

"Oh! Bless me!" exclaimed Auntie Hamps, – interrupting, as she glanced round the drawing-room. "We are grand! Well I never! We are grand!"

"Do you like it?" said Clara, blushing.

Auntie Hamps in reply told one of the major lies of her career. She said with rapture that she did like the new drawing-room suite. This suite was a proof, disagreeable to Auntie Hamps, that the world would never stand still. It quite ignored all the old Victorian ideals of furniture; and in ignoring the past, it also ignored the future. Victorian furniture had always sought after immortality; in Bursley there were thousands of Victorian chairs and tables that defied time and that nothing but an axe or a conflagration could destroy. But this new suite thought not of the morrow; it did not even pretend to think of the morrow. Nobody believed that it would last, and the owners of it simply forbore to reflect upon what it would be after a few years of family use. They contemplated with joy its first state of dainty freshness, and were content therein. Whereas the old Victorians lived in the future (in so far as they truly lived at all), the neo-Victorians lived careless in the present.

The suite was of apparent rosewood, with salmon-tinted upholstery ending in pleats and bows. But white also entered considerably into the scheme, for enamel paint had just reached Bursley and was destined to become the rage. Among the items of the suite was a three-legged milking-stool in deal covered with white enamel paint heightened by salmon-tinted bows of imitation silk. Society had recently been thunderstruck by the originality of putting a milking-stool in a drawing-room; its quaintness appealed with tremendous force to nearly all hearts; nearly every house-mistress on seeing a milking-stool in a friend's drawing-room, decided that she must have a milking-stool in her drawing-room, and took measures to get one. Clara was among the earlier possessors, the pioneers. Ten years-five years-before, Clara had appropriated the word "æsthetic" as a term of sneering abuse, with but a vague idea of its meaning; and now-such is the miraculous effect of time-she was caught up in the movement as it had ultimately spread to the Five Towns, a willing convert and captive, and nothing could exceed her scorn for that which once she had admired to the exclusion of all else. Into that mid-Victorian respectable house, situate in a rather old-fashioned street leading from Shawport Lane to the Canal, and whose boast (even when inhabited by non-conformists) was that it overlooked the Rectory garden, the new ideals of brightness, freshness, eccentricity, brittleness and impermanency had entered, and Auntie Hamps herself was intimidated by them.

Hilda gave polite but perfunctory praise. Left alone, she might not have been averse from the new ideals in their more expensive forms, but the influence of Edwin had taught her to despise them. Edwin's tastes in furniture, imbibed from the Orgreaves, neglected the modern, and went even further back than earliest Victorian. Much of the ugliness bought by his father remained in the Clayhanger house, but all Edwin's own purchases were either antique, or, if new, careful imitations of the pre-Victorian. Had England been peopled by Edwins, all original artists in furniture might have died of hunger. Yet he encouraged original literature. What, however, put Hilda against Clara's drawing-room suite, was not its style, nor its enamel, nor its frills, nor the obviously inferior quality of its varnish, but the mere fact that it had been exposed for sale in Nixon's shop-window in Duck Bank, with the price marked. Hilda did not like this. Now Edwin might see an old weather-glass in some frowsy second-hand shop at Hanbridge or Turnhill, and from indecision might leave it in the second-hand shop for months, and then buy it and hang it up at home, – and instantly it was somehow transformed into another weather-glass, a superior and personal weather-glass. But Clara's suite was not-for Hilda-thus transformed. Indeed, as she sat there in Clara's drawing-room, she had the illusion of sitting in Nixon's shop.

Further, Nixon had now got in his window another suite precisely like Clara's. It was astonishing to Hilda that Clara was not ashamed of the publicity and the wholesale reproduction of her suite. But she was not. On the contrary she seemed to draw a mysterious satisfaction from the very fact that suites precisely similar to hers were to be found or would soon be found in unnumbered other drawing-rooms. Nor did she mind that the price was notorious. And in the matter of the price the

phrase "hire-purchase" flitted about in Hilda's brain. She felt sure that Albert Benbow had not paid cash to Nixon. She regarded the hire-purchase system as unrespectable, if not immoral, and this opinion was one of the very few she shared with Auntie Hamps. Both ladies in their hearts, and in the security of their financial positions, blamed the Benbows for imprudence. Nobody, not even his wife, knew just how Albert "stood," but many took leave to guess-and guessed unfavourably.

"Do sit down," said Clara, too urgently. She was so preoccupied that Hilda's indifference to her new furniture did not affect her.

They all sat down, primly, in the pretty primness of the drawing-room, and Rupert leaned as if tired against his mother's fine skirt.

Hilda, expectant, glanced vaguely about her. Auntie Hamps did the same. On the central table lay a dictionary of the English language, open and leaves downwards; and near it a piece of paper containing a long list of missing words in pencil. Auntie Hamps, as soon as her gaze fell on these objects, looked quickly away, as though she had by accident met the obscene. Clara caught the movement, flushed somewhat, and recovered herself.

"I'm so glad you've come," she repeated yet again to Hilda, with a sickly-sweet smile. "I did so want to explain to you how it was we didn't ask George-I was afraid you might be vexed."

"What an idea!" Hilda murmured as naturally as she could, her nostrils twitching uneasily in the atmosphere of small feuds and misunderstandings which Clara breathed with such pleasure. She laughed, to reassure Clara, and also in enjoyment of the thought that for days Clara had pictured her as wondering sensitively why no invitation to the party had come for George, while in fact the party had never crossed her mind. She regretted that she had no gift for Bert, but decided to give him half-a-crown for his savings-bank account, of which she had heard a lot.

"To tell ye the truth," said Clara, launching herself, "we've had a lot of trouble with Bert. Albert's been quite put about. It was only the day before yesterday Albert got out of him the truth about the night of your At Home, Hilda, when he ran away after he'd gone to bed. Albert said to him: 'I shan't whip you, and I shan't put you on bread and water. Only if you don't tell me what you were doing that night there'll be no birthday and no birthday party-that's all.' So at last Bert gave in. And d'you know what he was doing? Holding a prayer-meeting with your George and that boy of Clowes's next door to your house down Hulton Street. Did you know?"

Hilda shook her head bravely. Officially she did not know.

"Did you ever hear of such a thing?" exclaimed Auntie Hamps.

"Yes," proceeded Clara, taking breath for a new start. "And Bert's story is that they prayed for a penknife for your George, and it came. And then they prayed for a bicycle for our Bert, but the bicycle didn't come, and then Bert and George had a fearful quarrel, and George gave him the penknife-made him have it-and then said he'd never speak to him any more as long as he lived. At first Albert was inclined to thrash Bert for telling lies and being irreverent, but in the end he came to the conclusion that at any rate Bert was telling what he thought to be the truth... And that Clowes boy is so *little*! ... Bert wanted his birthday party of course, but he begged and prayed us not to ask George. So in the end we decided we'd better not, and we let him have his own way. That's all there is to it... So George has said nothing?"

"Not a word," replied Hilda.

"And the Clowes boy is so *little*!" said Clara again. She went suddenly to the mantelpiece and picked up a penknife and offered it to Hilda.

"Here's the penknife. Of course Albert took it off him."

"Why?" said Hilda ingenuously.

But Clara detected satire and repelled it with a glance.

"It's not Edwin's penknife, I suppose?" she queried, in a severe tone.

"No, it isn't. I've never seen it before. Why?"

"We were only thinking Edwin might have overheard the boys and thrown a knife over the wall. It would be just like Edwin, that would."

"Oh, no!" The deceitful Hilda blew away such a possibility.

"I'm quite sure he didn't," said she, and added mischievously as she held out the penknife: "I thought all you folks believed in the efficacy of prayer."

These simple words were never forgiven by Clara.

The next moment, having restored the magic penknife to the mantelpiece, and gathered up her infant, she was leading the way to the dining-room.

"Come along, Rupy, my darling," said she.

"Rupy!" Hilda privately imitated her, deriding the absurdity of the diminutive.

"If you ask me," said Auntie Hamps, determined to save the honour of the family, "it's that little Clowes monkey that is responsible. I've been thinking it over since you told me about it last night, Clara, and I feel almost sure it must have been that little Clowes monkey."

She was magnificent. She was no longer a house-keeper worried about the processes of jam-making, but a grandiose figure out in the world, a figure symbolic, upon whom had devolved the duty of keeping up appearances on behalf of all mankind.

III

The dining-room had not yet begun to move with the times. It was rather a shabby apartment, accustomed to daily ill-treatment, and its contents dated from different periods, the most ancient object of all stretching backwards in family history to the epoch of Albert's great-grandfather. This was an oak arm-chair, occupied usually by Albert, but on the present occasion by his son and heir, Bert. Bert, spectacled, was at the head of the table; and at the foot was his auntie Maggie in front of a tea-tray. Down the sides of the table were his sisters, thin Clara, fat Amy, and little Lucy-the first nearly as old as Bert-and his father; two crumb-strewn plates showed that the mother and Rupert had left the meal to greet the visitors. And there were two other empty places. In a tiny vase in front of Amy was a solitary flower. The room was nearly full; it had an odour of cake, tea, and children.

"Well, here we are," said Clara, entering with the guests and Rupert, very cheerfully. "Getting on all right?" (She gave Albert a glance which said: "I have explained everything, but Hilda is a very peculiar creature.")

"A1," Albert answered. "Hello, all you aunties!"

"Albert left the works early on purpose," Clara explained her husband's presence.

He was a happy man. In early adolescence he had taken to Sunday Schools as some youths take to vice. He loved to exert authority over children, and experience had taught him all the principal dodges. Under the forms of benevolent autocracy, he could exercise a ruthless discipline upon youngsters. He was not at all ashamed at being left in charge of a tableful of children while his wife went forth to conduct diplomatic interviews. At the same time he had his pride. Thus he would express no surprise, nor even pleasure, at the presence of Hilda, his theory being that it ought to be taken as a matter of course. Indeed he was preoccupied by the management of the meal, and he did not conceal the fact. He shook hands with the ladies in a perfunctory style, which seemed to say: "Now the supreme matter is this birthday repast. I am running it, and I am running it very well. Slip inobtrusively into your places in the machine, and let me continue my work of direction."

Nevertheless, he saw to it that all the children rose politely and saluted according to approved precedents. His eye was upon them. He attached importance to every little act in any series of little acts. If he cut the cake, he had the air of announcing to the world: "This is a beautiful cake. I have carefully estimated the merits of this cake, and mother has carefully estimated them; we have in fact all come to a definite and favourable conclusion about this cake, – namely that it is a beautiful cake. I will now cut it. The operation of cutting it is a major operation. Watch me cut it, and then watch

me distribute it. Wisdom and justice shall preside over the distribution." Even if he only passed the salt, he passed it as though he were passing extreme unction.

Auntie Hamps with apparent delight adapted herself to his humour. She said she would "squeeze in" anywhere, and was soon engaged in finding perfection in everything that appertained to the Benbow family. Hilda, not being quite so intimate with the household, was installed with more ceremony. She could not keep out of her eye the idea that it was droll to see a stoutish, somewhat clay-dusted man neglecting his business in order to take charge of a birthday-party of small children; and Albert, observing this, could not keep out of his eye the rebutting assertion that it was not in the least droll, but entirely proper and laudable.

The first mention of birthday presents came from Auntie Hamps, who remarked with enthusiasm that Bert looked a regular little man in his beautiful new spectacles. Bert, glowering, gloomy and yet proud, and above all self-conscious, grew even more self-conscious at this statement. Spectacles had been ordained for him by the oculist, and his parents had had the hardihood to offer him his first pair for a birthday present. They had so insisted on the beauty and originality of the scheme that Bert himself had almost come to believe that to get a pair of spectacles for a birthday present was a great thing in a boy's life. He was now wearing the spectacles for the first time. On the whole, gloom outbalanced pride in his demeanour, and Bert's mysterious soul, which had flabbergasted his father for about a week, peeped out sidelong occasionally through those spectacles in bitter criticism of the institution of parents. He ate industriously. Soon Auntie Hamps, leaning over, rapped half-a-sovereign down on his sticky plate. Everybody pretended to be overwhelmed, though nobody entitled to prophesy had expected less. Almost simultaneously with the ring of the gold on the plate, Clara said:

"Now what do you say?"

But Albert was judiciously benevolent:

"Leave him alone, mother-he'll say it all right."

"I'm sure he will," his mother agreed.

And Bert said it, blushing, and fingering the coin nervously. And Auntie Hamps sat like an antique goddess, bland, superb, morally immense. And even her dirty and broken finger-nails detracted naught from her grandiosity. She might feed servants on dripping, but when the proper moment came she could fling half-sovereigns about with anybody.

And then, opening her purse, Hilda added five shillings to the half-sovereign, amid admiring exclamations sincere and insincere. Beside Auntie Hamps's gold the two half-crowns cut a poor figure, and therefore Hilda, almost without discontinuing the gesture of largesse, said:

"That is from Uncle Edwin. And this," putting a florin and three shillings more to the treasure, "is from Auntie Hilda."

Somehow she was talking as the others talked, and she disliked herself for yielding to the spirit of the Benbow home, but she could not help it; the pervading spirit conquered everybody. She felt self-conscious; and Bert's self-consciousness was still further increased as the exclamations grew in power and sincerity. Though he experienced the mournful pride of rich possessions, he knew well that the money would be of no real value. His presents, all useful (save a bouquet of flowers from Rupert), were all useless to him. Thus the prim young Clara had been parentally guided to give him a comb. If all the combs in the world had been suddenly annihilated Bert would not have cared, – would indeed have rejoiced. And as to the spectacles, he would have preferred the prospect of total blindness in middle age to the compulsion of wearing them. Who can wonder that his father had not fathomed the mind of the strange creature?

Albert gazed rapt at the beautiful sight of the plate. It reminded him pleasantly of a collection-plate at the Sunday School Anniversary sermons. In a moment the conversation ran upon savings-bank accounts. Each child had a savings-bank account, and their riches were astounding. Rupert had an account and was getting interest at the rate of two and a half per cent on six pounds ten shillings.

The thriftiness of the elder children had reached amounts which might be mentioned with satisfaction even to the luxurious wife of the richest member of the family. Young Clara was the wealthiest of the band. "I've got the most, haven't I, fardy?" she said with complacency. "I've got more than Bert, haven't I?" Nobody seemed to know how it was that she had surpassed Bert, who had had more birthdays and more Christmases. The inferiority of the eldest could not be attributed to dissipation or improvidence, for none of the children was allowed to spend a cent. The savings-bank devoured all, and never rendered back. However, Bert was now creeping up, and his mother exhorted him to do his best in future. She then took the money from the plate, and promised Bert for the morrow the treat of accompanying her to the Post Office in order to bury it.

A bell rang within the house, and at once young Clara exclaimed:

"Oh! There's Flossie! Oh, my word, she is late, isn't she, fardy? What a good thing we didn't wait tea for her! ... Move up, miss." This to Lucy.

"People who are late must take the consequences, especially little girls," said Albert in reply.

And presently Flossie entered, tripping, shrugging up her shoulders and throwing back her mane, and wonderfully innocent.

"This is Flossie, who is always late," Albert introduced her to Hilda.

"Am I really?" said Flossie, in a very low, soft voice, with a bright and apparently frightened smile.

Dark Flossie was of Amy's age and supposed to be Amy's particular friend. She was the daughter of young Clara's music mistress. The little girl's prestige in the Benbow house was due to two causes. First she was graceful and rather stylish in movement-qualities which none of the Benbow children had, though young Clara was pretty enough; and second her mother had rather more pupils than she could comfortably handle, and indeed sometimes refused a pupil.

Flossie with her physical elegance was like a foreigner among the Benbows. She had a precocious demeanour. She shook hands and embraced like a woman, and she gave her birthday gift to Bert as if she were distributing a prize. It was a lead-pencil, with a patent sharpener. Bert would have preferred a bicycle, but the patent sharpener made an oasis in his day. His father pointed out to him that as the pencil was already sharpened he could not at present use the sharpener. Amy thereupon furtively passed him the stump of a pencil to operate upon, and then his mother told him that he had better postpone his first sharpening until he got into the garden, where bits of wood would not be untidy. Flossie carefully settled her very short white skirts on a chair, smiling all the time, and enquired about two brothers whom she had been told were to be among the guests. Albert informed her with solemnity that these two brothers were both down with measles, and that Auntie Hamps and Auntie Hilda had come to make up for their absence.

"Poor things!" murmured Flossie sympathetically.

Hilda laughed, and Flossie screwing up her eyes and shrugging up her shoulders laughed too, as if saying: "You and I alone understand me."

"What a pretty flower!" Flossie exclaimed, in her low soft voice, indicating the flower in the vase in front of Amy.

"There's half a crumb left," said Albert, passing the cake-plate to Flossie carefully. "We thought we'd better keep it for you, though we don't reckon to keep anything for little girls that come late."

"Amy," whispered her mother, leaning towards the fat girl. "Wouldn't it be nice of you to give your flower to Flossie?" Amy started.

"I don't want to," she whispered back, flushing.

The flower was a gift to Amy from Bert, out of the birthday bunch presented to him by Rupert. Mysterious relations existed between Bert and the benignant, acquiescent Amy.

"Oh! Amy!" her mother protested, still whispering, but shocked.

Tears came into Amy's eyes. These tears Amy at length wiped away, and, straightening her face, offered the flower with stiff outstretched arm to her friend Flossie. And Flossie smilingly accepted it.

"It is kind of you, you darling!" said Flossie, and stuck the flower in an interstice of her embroidered pinafore.

Amy, gravely lacking in self-control, began to whimper again.

"That's my good little girl!" muttered Clara to her, exhibiting pride in her daughter's victory over self, and rubbed the child's eyes with her handkerchief. The parents were continually thus "bringing up" their children. Hilda pressed her lips together.

Immediately afterwards it was noticed that Flossie was no longer eating.

"I've had quite enough, thank you," said she in answer to expostulations.

"No jam, even? And you've not finished your tea!"

"I've had quite enough, thank you," said she, and folded up her napkin.

"Please, father, can we go and play in the garden now?" Bert asked.

Albert looked at his wife.

"Yes, I think they might," said Clara. "Go and play nicely." They all rose.

"Now quietly, qui-etly!" Albert warned them.

And they went from the room quietly, each in his own fashion, – Flossie like a modest tsarina, young Clara full of virtue and holding Rupert by the hand, Amy lumpily, tiny Lucy as one who had too soon been robbed of the privilege of being the youngest, and Bert in the rear like a criminal who is observed in a suspicious act. And Albert blew out wind, as if getting rid of a great weight.

IV

"Finished your greengage, auntie?" asked Clara, after the pause which ensued while the adults were accustoming themselves to the absence of the children.

And it was Maggie who answered, rather eagerly:

"No, she hasn't. She's left it to the tender mercies of that Maria. She wouldn't let me stay, and she wouldn't stay herself."

These were almost the first words, save murmurings as to cups of tea, quantities of sugar and of milk, etc., that the taciturn Maggie had uttered since Hilda's arrival. She was not sulky, she had merely been devoting herself and allowing herself to be exploited, in the vacuous manner customary to her, – and listening receptively-or perhaps not even receptively-offering no remark. Save that the smooth-working mechanism of the repast would have creaked and stopped at her departure, she might have slipped from the room unnoticed as a cat. But now she spoke as one capable of enthusiasm and resentment on behalf of an ideal. To her it was scandalous that greengage jam should be jeopardised for the sake of social pleasures, and suddenly it became evident she and her auntie had had a difference on the matter.

Mrs. Hamps said stoutly and defiantly, with grandeur:

"Well, I wasn't going to have my eldest grand-nephew's twelfth birthday party interfered with for any jam."

"Hear, hear!" said Hilda, liking the terrific woman for an instant.

But mild Maggie was inflexible.

Clara, knowing that in Maggie very slight symptoms had enormous significance, at once changed the subject. Albert went to the back window, whence by twisting his neck he could descry a corner of the garden.

Said Clara, smiling:

"I hear you're going to have some *musical evenings*, Hilda ... on Sunday nights."

Malice and ridicule were in Clara's tone. On the phrase "musical evenings" she put a strange disdainful emphasis, as though a musical evening denoted something not only unrighteous but snobbish, new-fangled, and absurd. Yet envy also was in her tone.

Hilda was startled.

"Ah! Who told you that?"

"Never mind! I heard," said Clara darkly.

Hilda wondered where the Benbows, from whom seemingly naught could be concealed, had in fact got this tit-bit of news. By tacit consent she and Edwin had as yet said nothing to anybody except the Orgreaves, who alone, with Tertius Ingpen and one or two more intimates, were invited, or were to be invited, to the first evening. Relations between the Orgreaves and the Benbows scarcely existed.

"We're having a little music on Sunday night," said Hilda, as it were apologetically, and scorning herself for being apologetic. Why should she be apologetic to these base creatures? But she couldn't help it; the public opinion of the room was too much for her. She even added: "We're hoping that old Mrs. Orgreave will come. It will be the first time she's been out in the evening for ever so long." The name of Mrs. Orgreave was calculated by Hilda to overawe them and stop their mouths.

No name, however, could overawe Mrs. Hamps. She smiled kindly, and with respect for the caprices of others; she spoke in a tone exceptionally polite, – but what she said was: "I'm sorry ... I'm sorry."

The deliverance was final. Auntie Hamps was almost as deeply moved about the approaching desecration of the Sabbath as Maggie had been about the casual treatment of jam. In earlier years she would have said a great deal more – just as in earlier years she would have punctuated Bert's birthday mouthfuls with descants upon the excellence of his parents and moral exhortations to himself; but Auntie Hamps was growing older, and quieter, and "I'm sorry ... I'm sorry" meant much from her.

Hilda became sad, disgusted, indignant, moody. The breach which separated her and Edwin from the rest of the family was enormous, as might be seen in the mere fact that they had never for a moment contemplated asking anybody in the family to the musical evening, nor had the family ever dreamed of an invitation. It was astonishing that Edwin should be so different from the others. But after all, was he? She could see in him sometimes bits of Maggie, of Clara, and even of the Unspeakable. She was conscious of her grievances against Edwin. Among these was that he never, or scarcely ever, praised her. At moments, when she had tried hard, she felt a great need of praise. But Edwin would watch her critically, with the damnable grim detachment of the Five Towns towards a stranger or a returned exile.

As she sat in the stuffy dining-room of the Benbows, surrounded by hostilities and incomprehensions, she had a sensation of unreality, or at any rate of a vast mistake. Why was she there? Was she not tied by intimate experience to a man at that very instant in prison? (She had a fearful vision of him in prison, – she, sitting there in the midst of Maggie, Clara, and Auntie Hamps!) Was she not the mother of an illegitimate boy? Victimised or not, innocent or not, she, a guest at Bert's intensely legitimate birthday fête, was the mother of an illegitimate boy. Incredible! She ought never to have married into the Clayhangers, never to have come back to this cackling provincial district. All these people were inimical towards her, – because she represented the luxury and riches and worldly splendour of the family, and because her illegitimate boy had tempted the heir of the Benbows to blasphemous wickedness, and because she herself had tempted a weak Edwin to abandon chapel and to desecrate the Sabbath, and again because she, without a penny of her own, had stepped in and now represented the luxury and riches and worldly splendour of the family. And all the family's grievances against Edwin were also grievances against her. Once, long ago, when he was yet a bachelor, and had no hope of Hilda, Edwin had prevented his father, in dotage, from lending a thousand pounds to Albert upon no security. The interference was unpardonable, and Hilda would not be pardoned for it.

Such was marriage into a family. Such was family life... Yes, she felt unreal there, and also unsafe. She had prevaricated about George and the penknife; and she had allowed Clara to remain under the impression that her visit to the house was a birthday visit. Auntie Hamps and destiny, between them, would lay bare all this lying. The antipathy against her would increase. But let it increase never so much, it still would not equal Hilda's against the family, as she thrilled to it then. Their narrow ignorance, their narrow self-conceit, their detestation of beauty, their pietism, their

bigotry-revolted her. In what century had they been living all those years? Was this married life? Had Albert and Clara ever felt a moment of mutual passion? They were nothing but parents, eternally preoccupied with "oughts" and "ought nots" and forbiddances and horrid reluctant permissions. They did not know what joy was, and they did not want anybody else to know what joy was. Even on the outskirts of such a family, a musical evening on a Sunday night appeared a forlorn enterprise. And all the families in all the streets were the same. Hilda was hard enough on George sometimes, but in that moment she would have preferred George to be a thoroughly bad rude boy and to go to the devil, and herself to be a woman abandoned to every licence, rather than that he and she should resemble Clara and her offspring. All her wrath centred upon Clara as the very symbol of what she loathed.

"Hello!" cried the watchful Albert from the window. "What's happening, I wonder?"

In a moment Rupert ran into the room, and without a word scrambled on his mother's lap, absolutely confident in her goodness and power.

"What's amiss, tuppenny?" asked his father.

"Tired," answered Rupert, with a faint, endearing smile.

He laid himself close against his mother's breast, and drew up his knees, and Clara held his body in her arms, and whispered to him.

"Amy 'udn't play with me," he murmured.

"Wouldn't she? Naughty Amy!"

"Mammy tired too," he glanced upwards at his mother's eyes in sympathy.

And immediately he was asleep. Clara kissed him, bending her head down and with difficulty reaching his cheek with her lips.

Auntie Hamps enquired fondly:

"What does he mean-'mother tired too'?"

"Well," said Clara, "the fact is some of 'em were so excited they stopped my afternoon sleep this afternoon. I always do have my nap, you know," – she looked at Hilda. "In here! When this door's closed they know mother mustn't be disturbed. Only this afternoon Lucy or Amy-I don't know which, and I didn't enquire too closely-forgot... He's remembered it, the little Turk."

"Is he asleep?" Hilda demanded in a low voice.

"Fast. He's been like that lately. He'll play a bit, and then he'll stop, and say he's tired, and sometimes cry, and he'll come to me and be asleep in two jiffs. I think he's been a bit run down. He said he had toothache yesterday. It was nothing but a little cold; they've all had colds; but I wrapped his face up to please him. He looked so sweet in his bandage, I assure you I didn't want to take it off again. No, I didn't... I wonder why Amy wouldn't play with him? She's such a splendid playmate-when she likes. Full of imagination! Simply full of it!"

Albert had approached from the window.

With an air of important conviction, he said to Hilda:

"Yes, Amy's imagination is really remarkable." As no one responded to this statement, he drummed on the table to ease the silence, and then suddenly added: "Well, I suppose I must be getting on with my dictionary reading! I'm only at S; and there's bound to be a lot of words under U-beginning with *un*, you know. I saw at once there would be." He spoke rather defiantly, as though challenging public opinion to condemn his new dubious activity.

"Oh!" said Clara. "Albert's quite taken up with missing words nowadays."

But instead of conning his dictionary, Albert returned to the window, drawn by his inexhaustible paternal curiosity, and he even opened the window and leaned out, so that he might more effectively watch the garden. And with the fresh air there entered the high, gay, inspiring voices of the children.

Clara smiled down at the boy sleeping in her lap. She was happy. The child was happy. His flushed face, with its expression of loving innocence, was exquisitely touching. Clara's face was full of proud tenderness. Everybody gazed at the picture with secret and profound pleasure. Hilda wished once more that George was only two and a half years old again. George's infancy, and her early

motherhood, had been very different from all this. She had never been able to shut a dining-room door, or any other door, as a sign that she must not be disturbed. And certainly George had never sympathetically remarked that she was tired... She was envious... And yet a minute ago she had been execrating the family life of the Benbows. The complexity of the tissue of existence was puzzling.

V

When Albert brought his head once more into the room he suddenly discovered the stuffiness of the atmosphere, and with the large, free gestures of a mountaineer and a sanitarian threw open both windows as wide as possible. The bleak wind from the moorlands surged in, fluttering curtains, and lowering the temperature at a run.

"Won't Rupert catch cold?" Hilda suggested, chilled.

"He's got to be hardened, Rupert has!" Albert replied easily. "Fresh air! Nothing like it! Does 'em good to feel it!"

Hilda thought:

"Pity you didn't think so a bit earlier!"

Her countenance was too expressive. Albert divined some ironic thought in her brain, and turned on her with a sort of parrying jeer:

"And how's the great man getting along?"

In this phrase, which both he and Clara employed with increasing frequency, Albert let out not only his jealousy of, but his respect for, the head of the family. Hilda did not like it, but it flattered her on Edwin's behalf, and she never showed her resentment of the attitude which prompted it.

"Edwin? Oh, he's all right. He's working." She put a slight emphasis on the last pronoun, in order revengefully to contrast Edwin's industry with Albert's presence during business hours at a children's birthday party. "He said to me as he went out that he must go and earn something towards Maggie's rent." She laughed softly.

Clara smiled cautiously; Maggie smiled and blushed a little; Albert did not commit himself; only Auntie Hamps laughed without reserve.

"Edwin will have his joke," said she.

Although Hilda had audaciously gone forth that afternoon with the express intention of opening negotiations, on her own initiative, with Maggie for the purchase of the house, she had certainly not meant to discuss the matter in the presence of the entire family. But she was seized by one of her characteristic impulses, and she gave herself up to it with the usual mixture of glee and apprehension. She said:

"I suppose you wouldn't care to sell us the house, would you, Maggie?"

Everybody became alert, and as it grew apparent that the company was assisting at the actual birth of a family episode or incident, a peculiar feeling of eager pleasure spread through the room, and the appetite for history-making leapt up.

"Indeed I should!" Maggie answered, with a deepening flush, and all were astonished at her decisiveness, and at the warmth of her tone. "I never wanted the house. Only it was arranged that I should have it, so of course I took it." The long-silent victim was speaking. Money was useless to her, for she was incapable of turning it into happiness; but she had her views on finance and property, nevertheless; and though in all such matters she did as she was told, submissively accepting the decisions of brother or brother-in-law as decrees of fate, yet she was quite aware of the victimhood. The assemblage was surprised and even a little intimidated by her mild outburst.

"But you've got a very good tenant, Maggie," said Auntie Hamps enthusiastically.

"She's got a very good tenant, admitted!" Albert said judicially and almost sternly. "But she'd never have any difficulty in finding a very good tenant for that house. That's not the point. The point is that the investment really isn't remunerative. Maggie could do much better for herself than that."

Very much better. Why, if she went the right way about it she could get ten per cent on her money! I know of things... And I bet she doesn't get three and a half per cent clear from the house. Not three and a half." He glanced reproachfully at Hilda.

"Do you mean the rent's too low?" Hilda questioned boldly.

He hesitated, losing courage.

"I don't say it's too low. But Maggie perhaps took the house over at too big a figure."

Maggie looked up at her brother-in-law.

"And whose fault was that?" she asked sharply. The general surprise was intensified. No one could understand Maggie. No one had the wit to perceive that she had been truly annoyed by Auntie Hamps's negligence in regard to jam, and was momentarily capable of bitterness. "Whose fault was that?" she repeated. "You and Clara and Edwin settled it between you. You yourself said over and over again it was a fair figure."

"I thought so at the time! I thought so at the time!" said Albert quickly. "We all acted for the best."

"I'm sure you did," murmured Auntie Hamps.

"I should think so, indeed!" murmured Clara, seeking to disguise her constraint by attentions to the sleeping Rupert.

"Is Edwin thinking of buying, then?" Albert asked Hilda in a quiet, studiously careless voice.

"We've discussed it," responded Hilda.

"Because if he is, he ought to take it over at the price Mag took it at. She oughtn't to lose on it. That's only fair."

"I'm sure Edwin would never do anything unfair," said Auntie Hamps.

Hilda made no reply. She had already heard the argument from Edwin, and Albert now seemed to her more tedious and unprincipled than usual. Her reason admitted the force of the argument as regards Maggie, but instinct opposed it.

Nevertheless she was conscious of sudden sympathy for Maggie, and of a weakening of her prejudice against her.

"Hadn't we better be going, Auntie?" Maggie curtly and reproachfully suggested. "You know quite well that jam stands a good chance of being ruined."

"I suppose we had," Auntie Hamps concurred with a sigh, and rose.

"I shall be able to carry out my plan," thought Hilda, full of wisdom and triumph. And she saw Edwin, owner of the house, with his wild lithographic project scotched. And the realisation of her own sagacity thus exercised on behalf of those she loved, made her glad.

At the same moment, just as Albert was recommencing his flow, the door opened and Edwin entered. He had glimpsed the children in the garden and had come into the house by the back way. There were cries of stupefaction and bliss. Both Albert and Clara were unmistakably startled and flattered. Indeed, several seconds elapsed before Albert could assume the proper grim, casual air. Auntie Hamps rejoiced and sat down again. Maggie disclosed no feeling, and she would not sit down again. Hilda had a serious qualm. She was obliged to persuade herself that in opening the negotiations for the house she had not committed an enormity. She felt less sagacious and less dominant. Who could have dreamt that Edwin would pop in just then? It was notorious, it was even a subject of complaint, that he never popped in. In reply to enquiries he stammered in his customary hesitating way that he happened to be in the neighbourhood on business and that it had occurred to him, etc., etc. In short, there he was.

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