HUGH WALPOLE

THE GODS AND MR. PERRIN

Hugh Walpole

The Gods and Mr. Perrin

Walpole H.

The Gods and Mr. Perrin / H. Walpole — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Hugh Walpole
The Gods and Mr. Perrin / A Tragi-Comedy

"The Way Here Also Was Very Wearisome Through Dirt And Shabbiness:
Nor Was There On All This Ground So Much As One Inn Or Victualling-House
Wherein To Refresh The Feebler Sort."—Pilgrim's Progress

TO PUNCH

My Dear Punch,

There are a thousand and one reasons why I should dedicate this book to you. It would take a very long time and much good paper to give you them all; but here, at any rate, is one of them. Do you remember a summer day last year that we spent together? The place was a little French town, and we climbed its high, crooked street, and had tea in an inn at the top—an inn with a square courtyard, bad, impossible tea, and a large black cat.

It was on that afternoon that I introduced you for a little time to Mr. Perrin, and you, because you have more understanding and sympathy than anyone I have ever met, understood him and sympathized. For the good things that you have done for me I can never repay you, but for the good things that you did on that afternoon for Mr. Perrin I give you this book.

Yours affectionately,

HUGH WALPOLE

Chelsea, January 1911.

CHAPTER I—MR. VINCENT PERRIN DRINKS HIS TEA AND GIVES MR. TRAILL SOUND ADVICE

I

VINCENT PERRIN said to himself again and again as he climbed the hill: "It shall be all right this term"—and then, "It *shall* be"—and then, "*This* term." A cold wintry sun watched him from above the brown shaggy wood on the horizon; the sky was a pale and watery blue, and on its surface white clouds edged with gray lay like saucers. A little wind sighed and struggled amongst the hedges, because Mr Perrin had nearly reached the top of the hill, and there was always a breeze there. He stopped for a moment and looked back. The hill on which he was stood straight out from the surrounding country; it was shaped like a sugar-loaf, and the red-brown earth of its fields seemed to catch the red light of the sun; behind it was green, undulating country, in front of it the blue, vast sweep of the sea.

"It *shall* be all right this term," said Mr. Perrin, and he pulled his rather faded greatcoat about his ears, because the little wind was playing with the short bristly hairs at the back of his neck. He was long and gaunt; his face might have been considered strong had it not been for the weak chin and a shaggy, unkempt mustache of a nondescript pale brown. His hands were long and bony, and the collar that he wore was too high, and propped his neck up, so that he had the effect of someone who strained to overlook something. His eyes were pale and watery, and his eyebrows of the same sandy color as his mustache. His age was about forty-five, and he had been a master at Moffatt's for over twenty years. His back was a little bent as he walked; his hands were folded behind his back, and carried a rough, ugly walking-stick that trailed along the ground.

His eyes were fixed on the enormous brown block of buildings on the top of the hill in front of him: he did not see the sea, or the sky, or the distant Brown Wood.

The air was still with the clear suspense of an early autumn day. The sound of a distant mining stamp drove across space with the ring of a hammer, and the tiny whisper—as of someone who tells eagerly, but mysteriously, a secret—was the beating of the waves far at the bottom of the hill against the rocks.

Paint blue smoke hung against the saucer-shaped clouds above the chimneys of Moffatt's; in the air there was a sharp scented smell, of some hidden bonfire.

The silence was broken by the sound of wheels, and an open cab drove up the hill. In it were seated four small boys, surrounded by a multitude of bags, hockey-sticks, and rugs. The four small boys were all very small indeed, but they all sat up when they saw Mr. Perrin, and touched their hats with a simultaneous movement. Mr. Perrin nodded sternly, glanced at them for a moment, and then switched his eyes back to the brown buildings again.

"Barker Minor, French, Doggett, and Rogers." he said to himself quickly; "Barker Minor, French.. . ;" then his mind swung back to its earlier theme again, and he said out loud, hitting the road with his stick, "It shall *be* all right *this* term."

The school clock—he knew the sound so well that he often thought he heard it at home in Buckinghamshire—struck half-past three. He hastened his steps. His holidays had been good—better than usual; he had played golf well; the men at the Club had not been quite such idiots and fools as they usually were: they had listened to him quite patiently about Education—shall it be Greek or German? Public School Morality, and What a Mother can do for her Boy—all favorite subjects of his.

Perhaps this term was not going to be so bad—perhaps the new man would be an acquisition: he could not, at any rate, be *worse* than Searle of the preceding term. The new man was, Perrin had heard, only just down from the University—he would probably do what Perrin suggested.

No, this term was to be all right. He never liked the autumn term; but there were a great many new boys, his house was full, and then—he stopped once more and drew a deep breath—there was Miss Desart. He tried to twist the end of his mustache, but some hairs were longer than others, and he never could obtain a combined movement.... Miss Desart.... He coughed.

He passed in through the black school gates, his shabby coat flapping at his heels.

The distant Brown Wood, as it surrendered to the sun, flamed with gold; the dark green hedges on the hill slowly caught the light.

II

The master's common room in the Lower School was a small square room that was inclined in the summer to get very stuffy indeed. It stood, moreover, exactly between the kitchen, where meals were prepared, and the long dining-room, where meals were eaten, and there was therefore a perpetual odor of food in the air. On a "mutton day"—there were three "mutton" days a week—this odor hung in heavy, clammy folds about the ceiling, and on those days there were always more boys kept in than on the other days—on so small a thing may punishment hang.

To-day—this being the first day of the term–the room was exceedingly tidy. On the right wall, touching the windows, were two rows of pigeon-holes, and above each pigeon-hole was printed, on a white label, a name—

"Mr. Perrin,"

"Mr. Dormer,"

"Mr. Clinton,"

"Mr. Traill."

Each master had two pigeon-holes into which he might put his papers and his letters; considerable friction had been caused by people putting *their* papers into other people's pigeon-holes. On the opposite wall was an enormous, shiny map of the world, with strange blue and red lines running across it. The third wall was filled with the fireplace, over which were two stern and dusty photographs of the Parthenon, Athens, and St. Peter's, Rome.

Although the air was sharp with the first early hint of autumn, the windows were open, and a little part of the garden could be seen—a gravel path down which golden-brown leaves were fluttering, a round empty flower-bed, a stone wall.

On the large table in the middle of the room tea was laid, one plate of bread and butter, and a plate of rock buns. Dormer, a round, red-faced, cheerful-looking person with white hair, aged about fifty, and Clinton, a short, athletic youth, with close-cropped hair and a large mouth, were drinking tea. Clinton had poured his into his saucer and was blowing at it—a practice that Perrin greatly disliked.

However, this was the first day of term, and everyone was very friendly. Perrin paused a moment in the doorway. "Ah! here we are again!" he said, with easy jocularity.

Dormer gave him a hand, and said, "Glad to see you, Perrin; had good holidays?"

Clinton took the last rock bun, and shouted with a kind of roar, "You old nut!"

Perrin, as he moved to the table, thought that it was a little hard that all the things that irritated him most should happen just when he was most inclined to be easy and pleasant.

"Ha! no cake!" he said, with a surprised air.

"Oh! I say, I'm so sorry," said Clinton, with his mouth full, "I took the last. Ring the bell."

Perrin gulped down his annoyance, sat down, and poured out his tea. It was cold and leathery. Dormer was busily writing lists of names. The Lower School was divided into two houses—Dormer

was house-master of one, and Perrin of the other. The other two junior men were under house-masters: Clinton belonged to Dormer; and Traill, the new man, to Perrin. Both houses were in the same building, but the sense of rival camps gave a pleasant spur of emulation and competition both to work and play.

"I say, Perrin, "have you made out your bath-lists? Then there are locker-names—I want." Perrin snapped at his bread and butter. "Ah, Dormer, please—my tea first."

"All right; only, it's getting on to four."

For some moments there was silence. Then there came timid raps on the door. Perrin, in his most stentorian voice, shouted, "Come in!"

The door slowly opened, and there might be seen dimly in the passage a misty cloud of white Eton collars and round, white faces. There was a shuffling of feet.

Perrin walked slowly to the door.

"Here we all are again! How pleasant! How extremely pleasant! All of us eager to come back, of course—um—yes. Well, you know you oughtn't to come now. Two minutes past four. I 'll take your names then—another five minutes. It's up on the board. Well, Sexton? Hadn't you eyes? *Don't* you know that ten minutes past four is ten minutes past four and *not* four o'clock?"

"Yes, sir, please, sir—but, sir—"

Perrin closed the door, and walked slowly back to the fireplace.

"Ha, ha," he said, smiling reflectively; "had him there!"

Dormer was muttering to himself, "Wednesday, 9 o'clock, Bilto, Cummin; 10 o'clock, Sayer, Long. Thursday, 9 o'clock—"

The golden leaves blew with a whispering chatter down the path.

The door opened again, and someone came in—Traill, the new man. Perrin looked at him with curiosity and some excitement. The first impression of him, standing there in the doorway, was of someone very young and very eager to make friends. Someone young, by reason of his very dress—the dark brown Norfolk jacket, light gray flannel trousers, turned up and short, showing bright purple socks and brown brogues. His hair, parted in the middle and brushed back, was very light brown; his eyes were brown and his cheeks tanned. His figure was square, his back very broad, his legs rather short—he looked, beyond everything else, tremendously clean.

He stopped when he saw Perrin, and Dormer looked up and introduced them. Perrin was relieved that he was so young. Searle, last year, had been old enough to have an opinion of his own —several opinions of his own; he had contradicted Perrin on a great many points, and towards the end of the term they had scarcely been on speaking terms. Searle was a pig-headed ass....

But Traill evidently wanted to "know"—was quite humble about it, and sat, pulling at his pipe, whilst Perrin enlarged about lists and dormitories and marks and discipline to his hearts content. "I must say as far as order goes I 've never found any trouble. It 's *in* a man if he 's going to do it—I've always managed them all right—never any trouble—hum, ha! Yes, you 'll find them the first few days just a little restive—seeing what you 're made of, you know; drop on them, drop on them."

Traill asked about the holiday task.

"Oh, yes, Dormer set that. *Ivanhoe*—Scott, you know. Just got to read out the questions, and see they don't crib. Let them go when you hear the chapel bell."

Traill was profuse in his thanks.

"Not at all—anything you want to know."

Perrin smiled at him.

There was, once again, the timid knock at the door. The door was opened, and a crowd of tiny boys shuffled in, headed by a larger boy who had the bold look of one who has lost all terror of masters, their ways, and their common rooms.

"Well, Sexton?" Perrin cleared his throat.

"Please, sir, you told me to bring the new boys. These are all I could find, sir—Pippin Minor is crying in the matron's room, sir." Sexton backed out of the room.

Perrin stared at the agitated crowd for some moments without saying anything. The boys were herded together like cattle, and were staring at him with eyes that started from their round, close-cropped heads. Perrin took their names down. Then he talked to them for three minutes about discipline, decency, and decorum; then he reminded them of their mothers, and finally said a word about serving their country.

Then he passed on to the subject of pocket-money. "It will be safer for you to hand it over to me," he said slowly and impressively. "Then you shall have it when you want it."

A slight shiver of apprehension passed through the crowd; then slowly, one by one, they delivered up their shining silver. One tiny boy—he had apparently no neck and no legs; he was very chubby—had only two halfcrowns. He clutched these in his hot palm until Perrin said, "Well, Rackets?"

Then, with eyes fixed devouringly upon them, the boy delivered them up.

"I don't like to see you so fond of money, Rackets." Perrin dropped the half-crowns slowly into his trouser pocket, one after the other. "I don't think you will ever see these half-crowns again." He smiled.

Rackets began to choke. His fist, which had closed again as though the money was still there, moved forward. A large, fat tear gathered slowly in his eye. He struggled to keep it back—he dug his fist into it, turned round, and fled from the room.

Perrin was amused. "Caught friend Rackets on the hip," he said.

Then suddenly, in the distance, an iron bell began to clang. The four men put on their gowns, gathered books together, and moved to the door. Traill hung back a little. "You take the big room with me, Traill," said Dormer. "I 'll give you paper and blotting-paper."

They moved slowly out of the room, Perrin last. A door was opened. There was a sudden cessation of confused whispers—complete silence, and then Perrin's voice: "Question one. Who were Richard I., Gurth, Wamba, Brian-de-Bois-Guilbert?.. . B,r,i,a,n—hyphen…"

The door closed.

III

A few papers fluttered about the table. It was growing dark outside, and a silver moon showed above the dark mass of the garden wall.

The brown leaves, now invisible, passed rustling and whispering about the path. Into the room there stole softly, from the kitchen, the smell of onions....

CHAPTER II—INTRODUCES A CONFUSING COMPANY OF PERSONS, WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON MRS. COMBER

I

IT would be fitting at this moment, were it possible, to give Traill's impressions, at the end of the first week, of the place and the people. But here one is met by the outstanding and dominating difficulty that Traill himself was not given to gathering impressions at all—he felt things, but he never saw them; he recorded opinions in simple language and an abbreviated vocabulary, but it was all entirely objective; motives, the way that things hung and were interdependent one upon the other, the sense of contrast and of the incessant jostling of comedy on tragedy and of irony upon both, never hit him anywhere.

Nevertheless, he had, in a clear, clean-cut way, his opinions at the end of the first week.

There is a letter of his to a college friend that is interesting, and there are some other things in a letter to his mother; but he was engaged, quite naturally, in endeavoring to keep up with the confusing medley of "things to be done and things not to be done" that that first week must necessarily entail.

His relations to Perrin and Perrin's relations to him are, it may be said here now, once and for all, the entire *motif* of this episode—it is from first to last an attempt to arrive at a decision as to the real reasons of the catastrophe that ultimately occurred; and so, that being the case, it may seem that the particulars as to the rest of the people in the place, and, indeed, the place itself, are extraneous and unnecessary; but they all helped, every one of them, in their own way and their own time, to bring about the ultimate disaster, and so they must have their place.

Traill had learnt during his three years at Cambridge that, above all things, one must not worry. He had been inclined, a little at first, to think, after the easy indolence of Clifton, that one ought to bother. He had found that two thirds in his Historical Tripos and a "Blue" for Rugby football were very easily; obtained; he found that the second of these things led to a popularity that invited a pleasant indifference to thought and discussion, and he was extremely happy.

His "Blue" would undoubtedly have secured him something better than a post at Moffatt's had he taken more trouble; but He had left it, lazily, until the last and had been forced to accept what he could get; in a term or two he hoped to return to Clifton.

All this meant that his stay at Moffatt's was in the nature of an interlude. He buoyantly regarded it as a month or two of "learning the ropes," and he could not therefore he expected to regard masters, boys, or buildings with any very intense seriousness. It is, indeed, one of the most curious aspects of the whole affair that he remained, for so long a period, blind to all that was going on.

In his motives, in his actions, he was of a surprising simplicity. He found the world an entirely delightful place—there was Rugby football in the winter, and cricket in the summer; there were splendid walks; there was a week in town every now and again; as to people, there was his mother—a widow, and he was her only son—whom he entirely worshiped; there were one or two excellent friends of his from Clifton and Cambridge; there was no one whom he really disliked; and there were one or two girls, hazily, not very seriously, in the distance, whom he had liked very much indeed.

He read a little—liked it when he had time; had a passion for Napoleon, whose campaigns he had followed confusedly at Cambridge; and was even stirred—again when he had time—by certain sorts of poetry.

And it is this that leads me to one of the questions that are most difficult of decision—as to how strongly, if indeed at all, he had any feeling for beauty before he met Isabel Desart.

He certainly—if he had it at this time—could not put it into words; but I believe that he had, in the back of his brain, a kind of consciousness about it all, and his meeting with Isabel fired what had been lying there waiting.

He never, certainly, talked about it, but it will be noticed that he went to the wood a great many times, even before he felt Isabel's influence, and that he realized quite vividly certain aspects of Pendragon and the Flutes; and he would not have cared for *Richard Feverel* quite so passionately had he not had something—some poetry and feeling—already in him.

The reverse of the shield is, at any rate, given in that first letter to his mother. He says of Moffatt's: "You never saw anything so hideous. The red brick all looks so fresh, the stone corridors all smell so new, the iron and brass of the place is all so strong and regular. It's like the labs at Cambridge on an extensive scale; you'd think they were inventing gases or something, not teaching boys the way they should go.... All the same, coming up the hill the other night, with the sun setting behind it, it looked quite black and grand—it 's the fresh-lobster color of it that I can't stand…"

That shows that he was, to some degree at any rate, sensitive to the way that the place looked, and he, in all probability, felt a great deal more about it than he ever said to anyone.

Cambridge may have done something for him—few people can spend three years with these gray palaces and blue waters without some kind of development, although probably—because we are English—it is unconscious.

II

He had, during that first week, too much to do to get any very concrete idea of the staff. On the first morning of term there was a masters' meeting, and he could see them all sitting, heavily, despondently, in conclave. There was a gradation of seats, and Traill, of course, took the lowest—a little, hard, sharp one near the window with a shelf just above his head, and it knocked him if he moved.

The Rev. Moy-Thompson, the head master—a venerable-looking clergyman, with a long grizzled heard and bony fingers—sat at the end of the table in an impatient way, as though he were longing for an excuse to fly into a temper. For the others, Traill only noticed one or two; Perrin, Dormer, and Clifton were there, of course. There was a large stout man with a heavy mustache and a sharp voice like a creaking door; a clergyman, thin and rather haggard, with a white wall of a collar much too big for him; an agitated little Frenchman, who seemed to expect that at any moment he might be the victim of a practical joke; a thin, bony little man with a wiry mustache and a biting, cynical speech that seemed to goad Moy-Thompson to fury; a nervous and bald-headed man, whose hand continually brushed his mustache and whose manner was exceedingly deprecating. There were others, but these struck Traill's eyes as they roved about.

During the discussion that followed concerning the moving of boys up and the moving of boys down, the time of lock-up, the possibilities and disadvantages of the new boys, it seemed to be everybody's intention to be as unpleasant as possible under cover of an agreeable manner. On several occasions it seemed that the storm was certain to break, and Traill bent eagerly forward in his seat; but the danger was averted.

As the week passed, he found that these men grew more distinct and individual. The stout man with the heavy mustache was called Comber; he had once been a famous football player, and was now engaged on a book concerning the athletes of Greece. The clergyman, the Rev. Stuart, was very quiet except on questions of ritual and ceremony, and these things stirred him into a passion. The little Frenchman, Monsieur Pons, spent his time in hating England and preparing to leave it—an escape that he never achieved.

The little man with the mustache, Birkland by name, seemed to Traill the most "interesting" of them. He was fierce and caustic in his manner to everybody and was feared by the whole staff.

White, the nervous man, never, so far as Traill could see, opened his mouth; and if he did say anything, no one paid the slightest attention.

None of these men, Traill discovered, concerned him very closely, as his work was for the most part at the Lower School. He was pleasant to all of them, and, if he had thought about it at all, would have said that they liked him; but he did not think about it.

His relations with Dormer, Perrin, and Clinton were quite agreeable. Dormer was kind and helpful in a fatherly way; Clinton admired his football and liked to compare Oxford (at which he had, several years before, been a shining light) with Traill's own university; Perrin asked him into his sitting-room for coffee and talked School Education to him at infinite length.

Everyone, during this first week, was quite pleasant and agreeable.

III

The ladies of the establishment came to Traill's notice more slowly; and they came to him, of course, considering his temperament, quite indefinitely and without his own immediate realization of anything. He could point, of course, to the moment of his meeting Isabel, because, from that moment, his life was changed; but it was the meeting rather than any keen and tangible idea of her that he realized.

It is essential, however, that Mrs. Comber should appear on the scene a good deal more clearly than he would ever probably see her. She had so much to do with everything that occurred—quite unconsciously, poor lady, as indeed she was always unconscious of anything until it was over—that she demands a close attempt at accurate presentation.

The immediate impressions that she left on any observer, however casual, were of size and color, and of all the things that go with those qualities. She was large, immense, and seemed, from her movements and her air of rather tentatively and timidly embracing the world, to be even larger.

Her hair was of a blackness and her cheeks of a redness that hinted at foreign blood, but was derived in reality from nothing more than Cornish descent—and that indeed may, if you please, be taken as foreign enough. There was a great deal of hair piled on her head, and in her continual smiles and anxiety to be pleasant there seemed, too, to be a great deal of her red cheeks.

In those earlier days, the daughter of a country clergyman, and the youngest of six sisters, she had been, when so permitted, jolly, noisy, with a tremendous sense of life. The key that was going, she believed, to unlock life for her was Romance, and she looked eagerly and enthusiastically down the dusty road to watch for the coming of some knight. When he came in the person of Freddie Comber, young, handsome, athletic, and the most devout of lovers, she felt that, now that her lamp was lighted, she had only got to keep the flame burning and she would be happy for ever. That—the keeping of it alight—seemed, as she looked at the handsome and ardent Freddie, an easy enough thing to do. She did not know that Fate very often, having given a tempting glimpse and even a positive handling of its burnished brass and intricate tracing, removes it altogether—merely, as it may seem to some cynical observers of life, for the fun of the thing. In any case, from the moment of her marriage, Mrs. Comber's eager hands found nothing to hold on to at all, and she passed, in the ensuing years from a plucky determination to make the "second best" do, to the final blind acquiescence in anything at all that might have the faintest resemblance to that earlier glorious radiance.

Freddie Comber's transition from the handsome, enthusiastic young lover into the stout, lethargic and querulous Mr. Comber, master of the Middle Fourth and anticipatory author of a work on the athletes of Greece, would need an exhaustive treatise on "Public School Education as applied to our Masters" for its reasonable analysis. Perhaps this faithful account of the relations of Perrin and Traill may offer some solution to that and other more complex riddles.

It says, however, everything for Mrs. Comber's pluck and determined stupidity that she lived, even now, after fifteen years' married life, at the threshold of expectation. Things that were apparent to the complete stranger in his first five minutes' interview with Comber were hidden, wilfully and proudly hidden, from *her*.

She yielded to facts, however, in this one particular, that she extended her attempts at Romance to wider fields. It always might return as far as Freddie was concerned—she was continually hoping and expecting that it would; but meanwhile she dug diligently in other grounds. Her three boys—fat, stolid, stupid, pugnacious—cared, they showed her quite plainly, nothing for her at all; but she put that down to their age, to their school, even to their appetites, their clothes, anything that pointed to a probable change in the future. In their holidays she spent her days in eagerly loving them and being repulsed, and then in hiding her love under a troubled indifference and being entirely disregarded.... They were unpleasant boys.

Another place for digging was the ground of "things," of property. Having had nothing at all when she was a girl, and having almost nothing—they were very poor, and she "managed" badly—now, she had always had an intense feeling for possession. She was generous to an amazing degree, and would give anything, in her tangled, impetuous kind of way, to anybody without a moment's thought. But she loved her valuables. They were very few. Potatoes and cabbages, clothing and school-bills for the boys, consumed any money that there might happen to be, and consumed it in a muddled, helpless kind of way that she was never able to prevent or correct. But things had come to her—been given, left, or eagerly seized in a wild moment's extravagance,—and these she cherished with all her eyes and hands. The peacock-blue Liberty screen, the ormolu clock, some few pieces of dainty Dresden china, some brass Indian pots, a small but musically charming piano, some sketches and two good prints, and edition de luxe of Walter Pater (a wedding-present, and she had never opened one of these beautiful volumes), some silver, a teapot, a tray, some cups that Freddie had won in an earlier, more glorious period, some small pieces of jewelry—over these things she passed every morning with a delicate, lingering touch.

Clumsy and awkward as she generally was, when she approached her valuables she became another person: she would lie awake thinking about them.... They seemed—dumb things as they were—to give her something of the affection for which, from more eloquent persons, she was always so continually searching.

She was as clumsy in her relations to all her neighbors and acquaintances as she was in her movements and her finances. She was famous for her want of tact; famous, too, for a certain coarseness and bluntness of speech; famous for a childlike and transparent attempt to make people like her—an attempt that, from its transparency, always with wiser and more cynical persons failed.

She generally thought of three things at once and tried to talk about them all; she was quite aware that most of the ladies connected with the town and the neighborhood disliked her, and she never, although she wondered in a kind of muddled dismay why it was, could discover a satisfactory reason. She spent her years in cheerfully rushing into people's lives and being hurriedly bundled out again—which "bundling," at every reiteration of it, left her as confused and dismayed as before.

But against all this rejection and muddled confusion there was, of course, to be set Isabel Desart. What Miss Desart was to Mrs. Comber no simple succession of printed words can possibly say. She was, in her free, spontaneous fashion, a great many things to a great many people; but to none of them was she quite the special and wonderful gift that she was to Mrs. Comber.

Perhaps it was some feeling of this kind that brought her so often, and for so long a period, down to Moffatt's—a proceeding that her London friends could never even vaguely understand. That she—having, as she might, such a glorious "time" in London behind her—should care to go and stay for so long a period at that dullest of places, a school, with those dullest and most arid of people, scholastic authorities (this term to include wives as well as husbands), was indeed to them all a total mystery.

Mrs. Comber, with all her faults and insufficiencies, would have seemed a poor enough answer to the riddle as an answer; it was, in fact, only partial.

In addition to Mrs. Comber, there was Cornwall; and Cornwall, as it was at Moffatt's, was quite enough to draw Isabel unerringly, irresistibly.

Of the place—the surroundings, the look of it all, the "sense" of it—there is more to be said in a moment—being seen, more completely perhaps, with Traill's new and unaccustomed eyes; it is enough here that, on every separate occasion of her coming, it meant to Isabel deeper and more vital experiences. She was beginning even to be afraid that it was not going to let her go again: its sea, its hard, black rocks, its golden gorge, its deep green lanes, its gray-roofed cottages that nestled in bowls and cups of color as no cottages nestle anywhere else in the world—these were all things that she dreamed of afterwards, when she had left them, to the extent, it began to seem to her, of danger and confusion.

She herself "fitted in" as only a few people out of the many that go there could ever do.

With her rather short brown hair that curled about her head, her straight eyes, her firm mouth, her vigorous, unerring movements, the swing of her arms as she walked, she seemed as though her strength and honesty might forbid her softer graces. To most people she was a delightful boy—splendidly healthy, direct, uncompromising, sometimes startling in her hatred of things and people, sometimes arrogant in her assured enthusiasms; Mrs. Comber, who, in her muddled eager way, had told her so much, knew of the other side of her, of her tenderness, her understanding.

The boys loved her, and she had been their envoy on many occasions of peril and disaster; they always trusted her to carry things through, and she generally did.

It was only, perhaps, with the other ladies of the establishment that she did not altogether find favor. The other ladies consisted of Mrs. Moy-Thompson, Mrs. Dormer, and the lady matrons—Miss Bonhurst, the two Misses Madder, and Miss Tremans.

Mrs. Moy-Thompson, a thin, faded lady in perpetual black, had long ago been crushed into a miserable negligibility by her masterful husband. She very seldom spoke at all and, when she did, hurriedly corrected what she had just said in a sudden fear lest she should be misunderstood. She allowed her husband to bully her to his heart's content.

Mrs. Dormer, stern, with the manner of one who never says what she means, had never got over the disappointment of her husband having, fifteen years before, missed the head-mastership. She was continually finding new reasons for this omission and venting her dislike on people who had had nothing whatever to do with it. She was neat and puritanical, and hated Mrs. Comber because she was neither of these things.

Of the matrons, it may be enough to say that they all disliked each other, but were perfectly ready to combine in their mutual dislike of the other ladies; they felt that their position demanded that they should assert their birth and breeding; they also felt that Mrs. Comber and Mrs. Dormer looked down on them.

The best of them was the matron of the Lower School, the elder Miss Madder—stout and kind-hearted and extremely capable. She made up for the undeniable fact that no one had ever asked her to change her name for a pleasanter one by loving the small boys of the Lower School with a warmth and good-humor that they none of them, in after life, forgot.

And so there they all were—most of them—a background, and simply, as individuals, witnesses to the whole case and, perhaps, by reason of their very existence, factors in assisting the result.

They were, most of them, never in young Traill's consciousness at all—Miss Madder, perhaps because she was at the Lower School; Mrs. Comber, because Isabel was staying with her… and Isabel.

IV

A word, finally, about the surrounding country.

It becomes, perhaps, at once most definitely presented if you take the Brown Hill as the center, and Pendragon to the right along the coast, and Truro inland to the left—both at an equal distance —as the farthest boundaries.

Between Truro and Moffatt's there is a ridge of hill—undulating, gently, vaguely shaped, with its cool brown colors melting into the blue or gray of the sky as dim clouds melt into one another.

The Brown Hill itself rises sharply, steeply, straight from the sea, with the little village—Chattock—at its feet, curling with its steep, cobbled street up the incline. Halfway down the hill there is a wood—the Brown Wood—and it hangs with all its feathery trees in friendly, eager fashion over the little white-stoned and yellow-sanded cove (so tiny and so perfect in its shape and color that it almost audibly cries out not to be touched). There is a little part of the wood where the trees part and you may sit, in a kind of magical wonder, right over the gray carpet of the sea, hearing what the wood, with its creaking and bending and rustling, is saying to the water and what the water, with its slipping and hissing and singing, is saying to the wood. Of the two towns Pendragon has become, from the invasion of the Vandals, modern and monotonous. It had, not so long ago, a cove on its outskirts—that was the whole of Cornwall in a tiny space; now there is a row of modern villas, red-roofed and wooden-paled. Traill, in his visits there, was concerned with the chief house there—The Flutes, owned by a certain Sir Henry Trojan, whose son, Robin Trojan, had been, although senior, a friend at Cambridge. The house was beautiful both in its position and in the spirit of its owner, and Traill snatched what moments he could to visit it and to snatch a respite there.

Had he known, it became in the back of his mind a contrast with the "lobster red" and the stone corridors of Moffatt's, so that he took its wide, high rooms and its shining, ordered garden with an added sense of richness. Had he realized how soon its dignity and peace stood to him for an "escape," he would have realized also his growing protest against his voluntary imprisonment. He went over also on occasions to Truro—because he liked the walk over the hill, because he liked certain quaintnesses in the market, in the sharp cobbles of Lemon Street, in the higher breezes of Kenwyn, because, above all, he liked the dark quiet and solemnity of the Cathedral.

The point about both Pendragon and Truro is that it was the kind of life that he was leading at Moffatt's—the sides of it that are soon to be given you in detail—that led him to notice these places. Contrast drove him to a sudden opening of his eyes—contrast and Isabel Desart. He was growing so very quickly.

In letters to his mother he spoke of a splendid little wood where one could sit and watch the sea for hours if there was only time; of the funny old hill, all brown, with the white road curling up it; of calling at The Flutes, and "Sir Henry Trojan and Lady Trojan being most awfully kind," and the house being quite beautiful, but very little about the people of the school, and during those first few weeks nothing at all about Isabel Desart.

It was not until Mrs. Comber gave her dinner-party that the preliminaries could be said to be over.

CHAPTER III—CONCERNS ALL THE WONDERFUL THINGS THAT MAY HAPPEN BETWEEN SOUP AND DESSERT

I

WHEN Mrs. Comber asked Vincent Perrin to her dinner-party he was delighted, although he assumed as great an indifference as possible. This was at the end of the first week of term, and he had not spoken to Miss Desart—he had merely bowed to her across the grass and gone indoors to teach the Lower Third algebra with a beating heart.

He was also fortunately prevented from seeing that Mrs. Comber was giving the dinner for Traill. If he had seen that, things might have been very different; as it was, he thought that that kind, good-natured woman (he did not always like her) had noticed his attachment—as he thought most carefully concealed—to Miss Desart and wanted to help him.

He himself had not noticed the attachment until the holidays. She had stayed at Moffatt's during part of the summer term, and he had played tennis with her and talked to her and even walked with her. But it was not until he had returned to the seclusion of his aged mother and Buckinghamshire that he realized that for the first time for twenty years he was in love.

The discovery affected him in many ways. In the first place it swept away in the most curious manner all the years that had intervened since the last affair. He was suddenly young again. He began to regret the way that he had spent his days. He played tennis (badly but with enthusiasm). He talked to the men of his Club about "the absurdity of considering forty-five any age," and quoted juvenile athletes of eighty. He gave his mustache a terrible time, wearing things to hold it straight at night, looking at it often in the glass.

He told his aged mother (a very old lady with a brown, shriveled face, a white lace cap, and mittens) vaguely but magnificently about there being somebody. He hinted that she cared for him and was eager to marry him as soon as he felt ready to ask her. He talked about "getting a house," even about wallpapers and stair-carpets and a nice sunny room for the old lady.

She was delighted at first, and then agitated. Who might this new young person be? Perhaps she would not like her—in any case, it meant taking a second place. But she idolized and worshiped her son: she knew sides of him that no one else knew—she saw him as a little, thin, serious hoy in knickerbockers.

But this new spirit revived things in Vincent Perrin that he had long thought dead. He knew, he savagely knew, in his heart of hearts, that he was a failure; he was determined that the world should never know it; he covered his knowledge with a multitude of disguises; but now perhaps, if she cared for him, there might yet be a chance.

But most of all he was afraid of something—he could never give it a name—that always crept slowly, increasingly over him as term advanced. He could not give it a name: that thing made up of a myriad details, of a myriad vexations; that evil spirit that they all, the masters and the rest, seemed to feel as the weeks gathered in numbers—the end-of-termy feelings: strained nerves, irritated tempers, almost, the last week or two when examinations came, seeing red.

No—this term it *shall* be all right. He felt, as he said good-by to his mother and kissed her, almost an eagerness to get back and prove that it was all right. After all, Searle had left, and there was Miss Desart. Supposing she cared for him? He twisted his thin fingers together. Oh! what things he could do!

And so he was glad of Mrs. Comber's dinner-party.

II

Giving a dinner-party was no light, easy thing for Mrs. Comber. So many wide issues were involved. Not very many dinner-parties were given during the term, and Mrs. Comber was perfectly aware of all the conversation that it would give rise to, of all the people that would in all probability be angry with all the other people because they had been asked or because they had not. There was, generally, a reason for a dinner. Some important person had to be asked, some unimportant people had to be worked off, someone was conscious that there had not been a dinner-party for a very long time. But on this occasion there was no reason except that Mrs. Comber had liked the look of young Traill, had at once thought of Isabel, and had conceived a plan.

Then, of course, it followed that other people must be asked: Vincent Perrin, because she didn't like him, but felt that she ought to; the Dormers, because it was time they were asked; and the elder Miss Madder, because she was the nicest of the matrons and wouldn't talk quite so much and quite so spitefully as the others would.

All this involved danger and destruction as far as the people invited were concerned. One chance word at dinner—some errant, tiny omission or commission—and anything might happen: the time might be made miserable for everybody.

But there was more immediate peril in it than that. There was in the first place "ways and means." How this harassed poor Mrs. Comber no words can say. She was forced to drive her frail cockle-shell of a boat between the Scylla of increased bills and the Charybdis of not-being-smart-enough.

Were things not right—if there were no meringues, no mushroom savories (there were rules and regulations about these things), no kummel—well, the party had better not be given at all. And then, on the other hand, there was the end of the month, nothing in hand to pay, and Freddie scowling over his *Greek Athletes* to such an extent that it wouldn't do to speak to him. All this was dreadfully difficult, but it revolved in reality almost entirely around Freddie's stout figure. Every dinner-party, every party of any kind, was an attempt to win Freddie back.

Mrs. Comber never confessed this even to herself, and she was, poor woman, only too completely aware that its usual result was to drive Freddie only more completely "in." Something was sure to happen, before the evening was over, to annoy him—she would have "such a time afterwards." But it always, of course, might be the other way. He might suddenly see, by some little word or act, how fond, how terribly fond, she was of him. She had learnt Bridge to please him—he used to like a game; but the result, although she would not admit it, had simply been disastrous.

She was much too muddled a person to be good at cards—she was very, very bad; she lost sixpences and shillings with the sinking feeling in her heart that they ought to be going to pay for their boys' clothes. She plunged desperately to win it all back again—she was known throughout the neighborhood as the worst player in the world.

It was indeed this conclusion to the evening that she dreaded most of all. There were eight of them, so, of course, they would have to play. Her heart sank because of all the things that might happen.

But Isabel was, of course, the greatest use in the world. She saved all kinds of needless extravagances; she always got things where they were cheap and not bad, instead of getting them expensive and rotten. She thought of a thousand little things, and she managed the servants—only two of them, and both ill-tempered.

Mrs. Comber said nothing to Isabel about young Traill—she did not even think that she had as yet noticed him. They neither of them said a word about Mr. Perrin.

III

Gathered all together in the drawing-room, it was everybody's chief object to avoid knocking things over. This may be taken metaphorically as well as literally, but in that ten minutes' prelude everyone had the hard task of being socially agreeable to people whom they met, as they met their tables and their chairs, their beds and their hair-brushes, every day of their lives.

The curtains; had been closely drawn, but outside the winds were up and were beating with wild fingers at the panes. They gathered in clusters about the house, screamed in derision at the dinner-party, chattered wildly round the buttresses and chimneys of the sedate and solemn buildings, and then rushed furiously down the gravel paths and away to the sea.

The tall lamp had been so placed that its light fell on the peacock-blue screen and the ormolu clock; it also fell on the enormous shoulders, in black silk, of Miss Madder, on the thin, bony neck of Mrs. Dormer, and on the deep red of Mrs. Comber's dress (open at one place at the back, where it should have been closed, and cut, Mrs. Dormer considered, a great deal lower than it need have been).

They were all waiting for Mr. Comber, and Mrs. Comber was trying to explain to Traill why Freddie was always late, why people at Moffatt's always liked meringues, and why with a magnificent "heart" hand she had, only two nights ago, gone hearts with most disastrous results. "They like them best with jam in them—you shall see to-night if they aren't good; and there was really no reason at all why they shouldn't have come off, but we had such bad luck, and I oughtn't to have played my King when I did; I'm always telling him that he ought to go and dress a little earlier—but he stays working."

Poor Mrs. Comber! She was talking with her eyes all about the room, with a sickening consciousness that something was wrong with her dress at the back, with a sure and a certain knowledge that it would be related in the common room the next morning that dinner was kept half an hour too long, with a keen misgiving that Mrs. Dormer and Miss Madder had quarreled furiously only the day before and that she had known nothing about it. Every now and again she glanced at Isabel to gather comfort from her, and Isabel's eyes were always ready to give it her.

Isabel was standing in a dark corner by the window, talking to Vincent Perrin. Her dress was of dark brown silk, very simply cut, and falling in one straight piece, save for a golden girdle that bound her waist. She was standing with that perfect repose that came to her so naturally; when she moved it was as though that was the only movement possible—her limbs did not seem to hesitate, as do the limbs of so many people, before they could decide on the way that they were going to act. Her brown eyes were smiling at Vincent Perrin in a very friendly way, and his heart was beating a great deal faster than it had ever beaten before.

He had taken very especial pains with his dressing that night. He found that there were only three shirts in his drawer and that the cuffs of two of them were badly frayed, and that the stud-hole in the third was so broken that it would need a very large stud indeed to fill it. He found a kind of soup-plate at last, but was painfully conscious of its brazen size and of a little brown smudge on the front of the shirt near the collar. His suit—it had done duty for a great many years—was painfully shiny in the back: he had never noticed it before; and there was a small tear in one sleeve that he knew everyone would see. His hair, in spite of water, was lanky and uneven; his mustache was raggeder than ever; his coat fell over his cuffs and shot them into obscurity in the most distressing manner.

All these things were new discomforts and distresses—he had never cared about them before. Then, when Isabel was so kind to him, he felt that they did not matter; he began in another few minutes to believe that he was rather well dressed after all; after ten minutes' conversation he was proud of his appearance.

Then suddenly his eye fell on Traill, and that moment must be recorded as the first moment of his dislike. Traill was absurd, quite absurd—over-dressed in fact.

His hair was brushed and parted so that you could almost see your face in brown glossiness. His coat fitted amazingly. There was a wonderful white waistcoat with pearl buttons, there were wonderful silk socks with pale blue clocks, there was a splendid even line of white cuff below the sleeves.

But Perrin was forced to admit that this smartness was not common; it was quite natural, as though Traill had always worn clothes like that. Could it be that Perrin was shabby… *not* that Traill was smart?

Perrin dragged his cuffs from their dark hiding-places, then saw that there was a new frayed piece that had escaped his scissors, and pushed them back again.

They all went in to dinner.

IV

Traill took Isabel in. That was the first time that she had consciously recognized him—even then it was fleeting and was confined in reality to a vague approval… and she liked his voice.

He had never seen her before—that is, he had never detached her from the vague background of people moving in the distance against the trees and the buildings; but now at once he fell in love with her. He had been in love before, and the strange suddenness of the ending of those fugitive episodes—the way that it had been, in an instant, like a candle blown out—had led him to fancy that love was always like that; he had even begun to be a little cynical about it. But he was in no way a complicated person. It didn't seem to him in the least strange that yesterday he should have laughed at love and that now he should have a sense of beauty and strange wonder—something that had suddenly, like streaming silk or a sweeping, golden sunlight, flooded Mrs. Comber's dining-room.

He thought her very grave; he noticed the white, crinkly sound of the silk of her dress against the table, the broad bands of light in her hair, and the way that her fingers, so slim and soft and yet so strong, touched the white cloth; and when she asked him whether he had ever been a schoolmaster before, the soup suddenly choked him and he could not answer her, but blushed like a fool, waving a spoon.

"And you like it!"

"I *love* it."

"So far. Well, you shall cherish your illusions." She still looked at him very gravely. "The boys like you so far."

"Ah! they told you!" He was pleased at that.

"Oh! one soon knows—they are cruelly frank."

Suddenly she caught her eyes away from him and looked down the table. Mrs. Comber was in distress. Everyone had finished their soup a terribly long time before, and there was no sign of the fish. One of those pauses that are so cruelly eloquent fell about the table. Freddie Comber was moodily staring at his plate and paying no attention at all to Dormer, who was trying to be pleasant. Mrs. Dormer was sitting up stiffly in her chair and gazing at Landseer's "Dignity and Imprudence" that hung on the opposite wall as though she had never seen it before.

It was at moments like this that Mrs. Comber felt as though the room got up and hit one in the face. She was always terribly conscious of her dining-room. It was a room, she felt, "with nothing at all in it." It had a wallpaper that she hated; she had always intended to have a new one, but there had never been quite enough money to spend on something that was not, after all, a necessity. The Landseer picture offended her, although she could give no reason—perhaps she did not care about dogs. The sideboard was a dreadfully cheap one, with imitation brass knobs to the doors of the cupboards, and there were three shelves of dusty and tattered books that never got cleared away.

All these things seemed to rise and scream at her. She noticed, too, with a little pang of dismay that one of the glass dessert dishes was missing. The set had been one of their wedding-presents—

the nicest present that they had had. Oh! those servants!… She talked with a brave smile to anybody and everybody, but she watched furtively her husband's gloomy face.

But Isabel, having given her a smile, turned back and attacked Mr. Perrin, feeling, as she always did about him, that she was sorry for him, that she wanted to be kind to him, and that she would be so glad when her duty would be over. She also noticed that she wanted to talk to Traill again.

Perrin himself had been in a state of torture during dinner that was, for him, an entirely; new experience. Traill had taken her in.... His thoughts hung about this fact as bees hang about a tree. Traill—Traill… with his elegant waistcoat and his beautiful shirt. He splashed his soup on to his plate. As through a mist people's words came to him—Miss Madder's fat, cheerful voice: "Oh! I think we shall fill the West Dormitory this term. There are five small Newsoms—all new boys, poor dears."… Comber himself, growling at the end of the table to Dormer: "It's perfectly absurd. It means that Birk-land has one hour less than the rest of us—that middle hour ten to eleven…"

The same old subjects, the same old dinners—but with her he was going to escape from it all; with her by his side, his ambition would grow wings.

He saw himself at Eton or Harrow, or a school-inspectorship. Why not? He was able enough. It only needed something to force him out of the rut.

But Traill had taken her in....

And then she turned and spoke to him, and at once he put up his hand as though he would stroke his chin, but really it was to cover the stud—the large soup-plate stud. He stroked his straggling mustache, and used his official voice. He spoke as he always did when he wanted to create an impression, as though in the cloistral courts of Cambridge.

Slow, deliberate, a little majestic… he shot his cuff back into his sleeve. He spoke of ambition, of the things that a man could do if he tried, of the things that *he* could do, if—

"If?" said Isabel.

"Oh! well, if… marriage, for instance, was such a help to a man… one never knew—" He drank furiously and finished at a gulp a glass of Freddie Comber's very bad claret.

Young Traill was having a very good time indeed with Miss Madder, and Isabel turned round to hear what they were talking about. The meringues had arrived—there was also fruit-salad, but everyone took meringues although they would have liked, had they dared, to take both—and conversation was quite lively.

"I do hope," said Mrs. Dormer, "that there will be several extra halves this term."

And at once poor Mrs. Comber, who was eagerly congratulating herself on the success with which, so far, she had escaped danger, burst in:

"Oh, so do I. You know, they always used to give the boys a half for every new baby born on the establishment. Well, you and I have done our duty nobly in that direction, haven't we, Mrs. Dormer?"

It is impossible that those who are not acquainted with both ladies should have any conception of the disaster that this simple sentence involved.

Mrs. Dormer had a glorious, pugnacious prudery in her stiff, angular body that rejoiced in any opportunity for display. She hated Mrs. Comber; she had now an excuse for being offended for weeks.

She could embroider and discuss to her heart's delight. She saw in the amusement of Miss Madder, the discomfort of her husband, the dismay of Miss Desart, the distaste of Mr. Perrin, the wrath of Mr. Comber, ample confirmation of her exultant prophecies. It does not take much to make a scandal at Moffatt's—and the propriety of the schoolmaster, the anxious, eager propriety, exceeds the propriety of every other profession.

Mrs. Dormer had the game in her hands, and she played the first move by sitting silently, whitely, protestingly in her chair.

"I *do* hope the football will be good this season," she said at last, quietly and patiently, to Mr. Comber.

Mrs. Comber realized at once that she was defeated. She did not know why she had said a thing like that—she knew that Mrs. Dormer didn't like such things to be talked about. She smiled and laughed and talked about gardens and the school bell and Mrs. Moy-Thompson's hat. "It always rings half a note flat, and it's no use speaking about it; and how she can bear that colored green when it's the last color she *ought* to wear, I *can't* think; if it weren't for these flies—what do you call them! —the roses would have done quite well." But her eyes stared desperately down the table at Freddie, and she saw that he would not look at her, and she knew that the dinner had been only one more nail in her coffin.

There was still, of course, Bridge.

V

Sitting at the little tables in the tiny drawing-room afterwards, they were all tremendously—as of course you must be at such small tables—conscious of each other.

They had drawn lots, and Mrs. Comber was playing with Dormer against her husband and Miss Madder at one table, and Mr. Perrin was playing with Mrs. Dormer against Isabel and young Traill at another.

It may seem a slight thing, but it was certainly a factor in the whole situation that Perrin was forced to gaze—over a very small intervening space—at Traill's immaculate clothes for the rest of the evening. He was always a bad Bridge player—he thought that he disguised his bad play by a haughty manner and a false assurance; to-night the confusion of his thoughts, his incipient dislike for Traill, the bad claret that he had drunk, the distracting way that Miss Desart held her cards, caused his play to be something insane.

Mrs. Dormer disliked intensely losing money, and there seemed every prospect, if Perrin continued to play like that, of her losing at least five shillings before the end of the evening. She was convinced that she had every reason for being angry, and when, at the end of the first deal, her partner had thrown away a splendid heart hand by refusing to follow any of her leads, she could not resist a stiff movement in her chair and a sharp, "Well, Mr. Perrin, I think we ought to have done better than that."

For the first time in his experience his usual assured reply, containing an implication that it was all his partner's fault, that he had been at Cambridge for three years, and that he taught Algebra and Euclid six days a week and therefore ought to know how to play Bridge if anyone did, failed him. He stared at her miserably, gathered the cards hurriedly together, and began to shuffle them in a dreadfully confused way. He knew that Miss Desart must think him a fool, and he wanted her so terribly badly to think him clever and even brilliant. He was sure that Traill was laughing at him. He hated the assurance with which he played. If only he, Perrin, had been playing with Miss Desart what things he might have done.... His head ached, and his shirt creaked a little every time he moved, and every time it creaked Mrs. Dormer made a little stir of disapproval.

At the other table also things were not as they should be. The drawing of lots had secured precisely the combination of players that Mrs. Comber had most wished to avoid. Whatever she did, however she played, she was lost. If she played badly, her husband, although playing against her, was infuriated at her stupidity; if she won, he hated being beaten, As it was, she was playing extremely badly, but was winning because of the good cards that she held. His brow was growing blacker and blacker. She held her cards so badly—she never could make them into a fan, and every now and again one fell with a sharp rattle against the table.

Also she forgot sometimes that they were playing and broke into sentences that had to be instantly checked—as, for instance: "Oh, I saw Mrs.– I'm so sorry, it 's my lead."

"I believe *this* term.... Oh! I beg your pardon.... *What* are trumps?"

Every now and again she gazed at the peacock screen, and the clock, and the dark corner of the room where there was a little water-color in a gilt frame, and they gave her comfort.

The end of the rubber came, and Mrs. Dormer refused to play any more; they had had magnificent cards, but she had lost three shillings. She wouldn't look at Mr. Perrin. He stood nervously moving one foot against the other, pulling his mustache.

"No, really I'm afraid we must go. You 've finished your rubber, Mrs. Comber? Yes, we *ought* to have won.... No, I can't think how it was."

"Considering the way my wife's been playing," said Freddie Comber brutally, "I think it is just as well to stop."

Mrs. Comber chattered with amazing confusion as she helped Mrs. Dormer to get her cloak. In her eyes something bright was shining, and every now and again she put up her band to push back some of her black hair (always on the edge of a perilous descent) with a little, desperate action.

"Good night. I'm so glad you've enjoyed it. We meet to-morrow, of course, although I can't think why they aren't going to play golf—there's going to be *such* a storm in an hour or two, isn't there?—probably because it's football to-morrow afternoon. Yes, good-by." Everyone departed. Mr. Perrin stood desperately with something going up and down in his throat. He had a sentence in his head: "Please, Miss Desart, *do* let me see you back to the lodge." (Mrs. Comber had had to plant her out there to sleep because there was no room in their own tiny house.) He meant to say it, he wanted to say it. He clutched his mortar-board frantically in his band. Then suddenly be beard Traill's voice:

"Oh! please, Miss Desart—of course, I'll see you back. Good night, Mrs. Comber. Thank you *so* much—I've *loved* it. Good night, Comber. Night, Perrin. Look out, Miss Desart, it's dark."

Perrin felt his band just touched by Miss Desart's, and her voice, "Good night, Mr. Perrin."

He was left alone on the step.

VI

I don't suppose that at this stage of things Isabel bad the very slightest idea of all the emotions that had been in play that evening. Her bead, as they walked away down the dark gravel path, was full of her hostess.

"Poor Mrs. Comber," she said, and then checked herself as though there were some disloyalty in talking about her. "I hate Mrs. Dormer," she added quietly.

"I don't like her," Traill said. "And Dormer's such a jolly little man. I don't envy; him."

"Oh! I don't suppose it's her fault any more than it's anyone's fault here about anything they do. It's all a case of nerves."

There was going to be a storm soon. Already that little preparatory whisper of the wind, the ominous, frightened rustle of the leaves down the path, was about them. It was all very dark, with a curious white light on the horizon, and the dark buildings of the Lower School huddled against it in sharp, black outline like the broad backs of giants bending to the soil.

The scent of trees—vague and uncertain in the daytime, but now clear and pungent—was borne through the air, and the voice of the sea, rolling in long, mournful cadences far below the hills, came up to them. The wind's whisper grew into a furious, strangled cry; little eddies of it swept about their feet, and cascades of withered leaves fell wildly against them and were blown, sweeping, streaming away.

They were silent. Traill was thinking of her voice. It was so grave and assured and restful. He thought that he could trust her tremendously. But there was reserve in it too, and he felt, a little hopelessly, that he might never perhaps get to know her better.

When they got to the lodge gates, they stopped and stood for a moment silently.

Then she said, looking very gravely in front of her at the dark bend of the road, "There must be such a storm coming up. I feel it all through me. It *was* depressing to-night, was n't it?"

"Just a little," he said.

"Anyhow, I'm glad you like it—being here. Mind you always do. I don't want to be pessimistic when you are just beginning; but—well, you don't mean to stay here for ever, do you?"

"I should think not," he answered eagerly. "Only a term or two at the most, and then I hope to go back to Clifton, my old school."

"That's right—because—really it isn't a very good place to be—this."

"Why not?" he asked.

"It's difficult to explain without maligning people and making things out worse than they really are." She paused a moment, and then she went on: "Do you know, at the bottom of the hill, just before you get into the village, a melancholy orchard? One always passes it. You will see at the right time of the year lots of green apples on the trees, but they never seem to come to anything. And such blossoms in the spring! I 've seen men working there sometimes. I don't know what it is, but nothing 's any good there. They call it in the village 'Green Apple Orchard.'… Well, I've stayed here a great deal, and there's an obvious comparison."

"That's cheerful," he said, laughing. "It would, I suppose, be awful if one had to stay here for ever like Perrin and Dormer and the rest of them; but this time next year will see me somewhere better, I hope."

"Mind you stick to that," she said eagerly. "I have a horrible kind of feeling that they all meant to go very soon; but here they are still—soured, disappointed. Oh! it doesn't bear thinking of."

"One must have ambition," he answered her confidently.

She smiled at him, and took his hand, and said good night.

He went, smiling, to his room. As he climbed into bed, the storm broke furiously.

CHAPTER IV—BIRKLAND LOQUITUR

I

AT the end of his first month young Traill looked back, as it were from the top of a hill, and thought that it all had been very pleasant. How much of this pleasantness was due to Isabel (although he had seen her during that period extremely seldom) and how much of it was due to his agreeable acceptance of things as they were without any very definite challenge to them to be different, it is impossible to say.

The crowded day had of course something to do with it: the fact that there was never from the first harsh clanging of the bell down the stone passages at half-past six to the last leap into bed, jumping as it were from a heap of Latin exercises and the cold challenge of Perrin's voice as he went round the dormitories turning lights out—never a moment's pause to think about anything extra at all. But he was in no way a reflective person. He saw that his own small boys in their untidy, scrambling kind of way liked him and that the bigger boys of the Upper Fourth, to whom he taught French twice a week, revered him because of his football.

The masters at the Upper School seemed pleasant fellows, although he might, had he thought about it, have perceived dimly an atmosphere of unrest and discomfort in their common room.

With Moy-Thompson as yet he had had no dealings at all. He had been to supper there once on Sunday night, had been appalled by the dreariness of the whole affair, the shrivelled ill-temper of Moy-Thompson's parents (aged about ninety apiece), the inadequacy of the food, the melancholy inertia of Mrs. Moy-Thompson; but he had had no nearer relations with him.

He had, indeed, already begun to perceive that in his own common room things were not quite as they should be. He was always an exceedingly equable and easy-tempered person, and he had been surprised at himself on several occasions for being irritated at very unimportant and insignificant details. There were, for instance, the incidents of the bath and the morning papers. Both of these incidents derived their irritation from their original connection with Perrin, and this might have led him, had he thought about it, to the discovery that he did not like Perrin and that Perrin did not like him. But he never dwelt upon things—he was always thinking of the matter immediately in hand, and where there was an empty reflective quarter of an hour his eyes were on Isabel.

The incident of the bath was, it might have been thought, inconsiderable.

Perrin's bedroom was next to Traill's. Opposite their doors, on the other side of the passage, was a bathroom containing two baths. In this bathroom Traill always arrived some minutes after Perrin. Try as he might, he never succeeded in arriving first. Perrin always filled both baths, one with hot and one with cold, and stood moodily, his naked body gaunt and bony in the gray light, watching them whilst they filled. Traill was forced to wait until Perrin had had both his baths before he could have his. At first it had seemed a small matter. Gradually as the days passed the irritation grew. There was something in Perrin's complacent immobility as he stood above his bath that was of itself annoying. Why should a man wait? One morning they rushed out together. There were words.

"I say, Perrin, why not have hot and cold in the same bath?"

"Really, Traill, it isn't, I should have thought, quite your place...."

Traill sometimes dreamt early in the morning of French exercises, of the midday mutton, of Perrin's bony, ugly body watching the bath. If Traill had thought about it, he would have seen that Perrin did not like him.

The incident of the morning paper was equally trivial. Dormer always had breakfast in his own house, and that left therefore three of them. They clubbed together and provided three newspapers

—the *Morning Post*, the *Daily Mail*, and a local affair. It was obvious that the person who came in last was left with the local paper. Perrin generally came in last, because he took early prep, in the Upper School, and he expected that the *Morning Post* should be left for him. But Traill, as he paid the same subscription as Perrin, did not see why this should be. Clinton always took the *Daily Mail*, and therefore Perrin had to be contented with the *Cornish News*. There was at last an argument. Traill refused to give way. The rest of the meal was eaten in absolute silence. Perrin came no more to Traill's room for an evening chat—a very small matter.

But at the end of the first month Traill did not see these things as in any way ominous. He could keep his boys in order. He liked his game of football; he was in a glow because he was in love —moreover, he had never quarreled with anyone in his life. He did not know that he had made any progress with Isabel. It was very difficult to see her. She came down sometimes to watch them play football; after Chapel in the evening, he had walked up the little dark lane with her, the stars above the dark, cloudy trees, and the leaves a carpet about their feet—and at every meeting he loved her more. When he had spare hours in the afternoon he liked to walk to the Brown Wood or down to the sea. Once or twice he bicycled over to Pendragon and had tea with the Trojans. Sir Henry Trojan was a man who had appealed to him immensely. In spite of his size and strength and simplicity, his air of a man who lived out of doors and read little, he had a tremendous poetic passion for Cornwall. He showed Traill a great many things that were new to him. He began to feel a sense of color; he saw the Brown Wood, the twisting, gray-roofed village, the sweeping, striving sea with fresh vision. He stopped sometimes in his walks and drew a deep breath at the way that the lights and colors were hung about him. Of course the contrast of his school life drove these other things against him—and also his love for Isabel.

These little things would have no importance were it not that they all helped to blind him to his true relations with Perrin. He did not think about Perrin at all; he did not think about his life even in any very definite way.

He never analyzed things; he took things and used them.

And then at the end of that first month Birkland talked in the most amazing way....

II

Traill had been attached to Birkland from the first. The man had definite personality—aggressive in its influence—and contempt of the rest of the common room, but they justified it to some extent by their own terror of his tongue and their eager criticism of him behind his back.

He had treated Traill like the rest, but then Traill never noticed it. He was not afraid of Birkland, he never resented his criticism, and he appreciated his humor.

And then suddenly one evening Birkland asked him to come and see him. His room was untidy —littered with school-books, exercise-books, stacks of paper to be corrected; but behind this curtain of discomfort there were signs of other earlier things: some etchings, dusty and uncared for, sets of Meredith and Pater, some photographs, and a large engraving of Whistler's portrait of his mother. The latticed window was open, and from the night outside, blowing into the gusty candles, there were the scent of decaying leaves and a faint breath of the distant sea.

Birkland was thin—sticks of legs and arms; a short, wiry mustache; heavy, overhanging eyebrows; thin, straight, stiff hair turning a little gray. He gave Traill a drink, watched him fill a pipe; and then, huddled in his armchair, his legs crossed under him, his eyes full on the open window and the night sky, he asked Traill questions.

"And so you like it?"

"Yes—immensely!"

"Why?"

"Well—why not? After all, it gives a fellow what he wants. There's plenty of exercise—the hours are healthy—the fellows are quite nice fellows. I like teaching."

Traill gave a sigh of satisfaction, and, after all, he had omitted his principal reason.

"Yes. How long do you mean to stay here?"

"Oh! a year, I suppose. Then I ought to get to Clifton."

"Yes. You'd better not tell the Head that, though. How do you like the other men?"

"Oh, I think they 're very good fellows. Dormer's splendid."

"Yes—and Perrin?"

"Oh! he's all right. He seems to get annoyed pretty easily. As a matter of fact, I have felt rather irritated once or twice."

"Yes—everyone's wanted to cut Perrin's throat some time or other. As a matter of fact, I shouldn't wonder if it was n't the other way round—one day."

There was a pause, and then Birkland said, "And so you like it."

"Yes, of course; don't you?"

Birkland laughed. There was a long pause. Then Traill said again, rather uncertainly, "Don't you?"

He had never thought of Birkland as an unhappy man—as a matter of fact he never thought of people as being definite kinds of people, and he scarcely ever read novels.

Then Birkland spoke: "You had better not ask me that, young man, if you want an encouraging answer."

Then very slowly, after another pause, the words came out: "I'm going to speak the truth to you to-night for the good and safety of your soul, and I haven't cared for the good and safety of anyone's soul for—well!—I should be afraid to say how long. I'm afraid—I don't really care very much about the safety of yours—but I care enough to speak to you; and the one thing I say to you is—get out—get away. Fly for your life." His voice sank to a whisper. "If you don't, you will die very soon—in a year perhaps. We are all dead here, and we died a great many years ago."

Traill moved uncomfortably in his chair. He smiled across the flickering candles at Birkland.

"Oh! I say," he said, "that's a bit of exaggeration, isn't it? I suppose one is tired sometimes, of course; but, after all, there are a good many men in the country who make a pretty good thing out of mastering and are n't so very miserable."

It was evident that he thought that it was all a kind of joke on Birkland's part. He pulled contentedly at his pipe.

But the other man went on: "I shouldn't have said this at all if I hadn't meant it, and if I hadn't got twenty years of experience behind me to prove what I say. I don't know why I'm bothering you, I'm sure; but now I've begun I'm going on, and you've got to listen. You can't say you haven't been given your chance. Have you ever looked round the common room and seen what kind of men they are?"

"Of course," said Traill; "but," he added modestly, "I'm not observant, you know. I'm not at all a clever kind of chap."

"Well, you would have seen what I'm telling you written in their faces right enough. Mind you—what I'm saying to you doesn't apply to the first-class public school. That's a different kind of thing altogether. I'm talking about places like Moffatt's—places that are trying to be what they are not—to do what they can't do—to get higher than they can reach. There are thousands of them all over the country—places where the men are underpaid, with no prospects, herded together, all of them hating each other, wanting, perhaps, towards the end of term, to cut each other's throats. Do you suppose that that is good for the boys they teach?"

He paused and relit his pipe, and his voice was, too, measured, but showing in its tensity his emotion.

"It's a different thing with the bigger places. There, there is more room; the men don't live so close together; they are paid better; there is a chance of getting a house; there is the *esprit de corps* of the school… but here, my God!"

Birkland bent forward, his face white, over the candles.

"Get out of it, Traill, you fool! You say, in a year's time. Don't I know that? Do you suppose that I meant to stay here for ever when I came? But one postpones moving. Another term will be better, or you try for a thing, fail, and get discouraged… and then suddenly you are too old—too old at thirty-three—earning two hundred a year… too old! and liable to be turned out with a week's notice if the Head doesn't like you—turned out with nothing to go to; and he knows that you are afraid of him and he has games with you."

Traill stared at the little man's burning eyes. How odd of Birkland to talk like this!

"You think you will escape, but already the place has its fingers about you. You will be a different man at the end of the term. You will be allowed no friends here, only enemies. You think the rest of us like you. Well, for a moment perhaps, but only for a moment. Soon something will come… already you dislike Perrin. You must not be friends with the Head, because then we shall think that you are spying on us. You must not be friends with us, because then the Head will hear of it and will immediately hate you because he will think that you are conspiring against him. You must not be friends with the boys, because then we shall all hate you and they will despise you. You will be quite alone. You think that you are going to teach with freshness and interest—you are full of eager plans, new ideas. Every plan, every idea, will be immediately killed. You must not have them—they are not good for examinations—you are trying to show that you are superior."

Birkland paused. Traill moved uneasily in his chair.

"Wait! You must hear me out. It all goes deeper than these things. It is murder—self-murder. You are going to kill—you have got to kill—every fine thought, every hope, that you possess. You will be laughed at for your ambitions, your desires. You will not even be allowed any fine vices. You must never go anywhere, because you are neglecting your work. You have no time. Here we are—fifteen men—all hating each other, loathing everything that the other man does—the way he eats, the way he moves, the way he teaches. We sleep next door to each other, we eat together, we meet all day until late at night—hating each other."

"After all," said Traill, still smiling, "it is only a month or two, and there are holidays."

"If term lasted another week or two," went on Birkland quietly, "murder would be committed. The holidays come, and you go out into the world to find that you are different from all other men—to find that they know that you are different. You are patronizing, narrow, egotistic. You realize it slowly; you see them shunning you—and then back you go again. God knows, they should not hate us—these others! they should pity us. If you marry, see what it is—look at Mrs. Dormer, Mrs. Comber, Mrs. Moy-Thompson. Look at their husbands, their life. There is marriage—no money, no prospects, perhaps in the end starvation! And gradually there creeps over you a dreadful and horrible inertia: you do not care—you do not think—you are a ghost. If one of us dies, we do not mind—we do not think about it. Only, towards the end of the term, when the examinations come, there creeps about the place a new devil. All our nerve is gone; our hatred of each other begins to be active. It is the end-of-termy devil.... Another week or two, and there is no knowing what we might do. We are all tired, horribly tired. Be careful then what you do and what you say."

"My word!" said Traill, filling his pipe, "what a horrible picture of things! You must be out of sorts. Why, it's hysteria!"

Birkland had crawled back into his chair again. He puffed at his pipe.

"Oh! of course you don't see it!" he said. "After all, why should you? But it's true, every word of it. Oh! I'm resigned enough now. Besides, it's the beginning of the term. I'm inclined to think it's untrue, myself, just now. Wait and see. Watch White after he's had an interview with the Head—see

Perrin and Comber together later on—study Mrs. Comber. But don't you bother. You won't listen to me—why should you? Only, in ten years' time you 'll remember."

After that they talked of other things. Birkland was rather amusing in his sharp, caustic way.

"I say," said Traill as he stood by the door on the way out, "that was all rot; was n't it?"

"What was?" asked Birkland.

"Why, about the place—this place."

"All rot!" said Birkland gravely.

III

But of course one dismisses these things very soon—especially, and immediately, if the person in question is Archie Traill.

Why think about a problematic and depressing forty? Take these men that Birkland so gloomily points to as disappointing and unsatisfactory exceptions. Life is like that. There are always the riders who collapse into ditches and sit there mumbling, wishing for the company, down in the dirt and the grime, of their fellow-horsemen.

Meanwhile there is this fine autumn weather. Birkland remains a crabbed shadow; life is sharp, pungent—formed with faint blue skies, dim and shining like clear glass with a hard yellow sun stuck like a tethered balloon between saucer-clouds.

Archie Traill, on a free afternoon—an early frost had made the ground too hard for football—in the week after that Birkland evening, stood in the village street as the church clock struck half-past three, and he thanked God for a half-holiday.

The air was so still that the distant mining stamps and the breaking sea had it for the plain of their unceasing war, cannon against cannon, and the withdrawing rattle of their rival shot echoing against the blue horizon and the stiff side of the Brown Hill. The village cobbles shone and glittered; the gray roofs lay like carpets spread to dry. The brown church tower seemed to sway—so motionless was the rest of the world—with the clatter of its chiming clocks.

Suddenly Isabel Desart turned the corner. "Good afternoon, Mr. Traill," and the clasp of her hand was strong and clean as all the rest of her movements. She smiled at him as she always smiled, a little ironically and also a little seriously, as though she found the world a strange place, ought to think it a solemn one, but couldn't help finding it funny.

Three old women, their skirts kilted about them, their eyes fixed on vacancy, flung their voices into the silence like balls against a board.

"And she only sixteen—what a size!"

"Only sixteen!—to think of it!"

"With her great legs and all!"

"Only sixteen…!"

The man and woman moved up the road together. She was usually so full of things to say that her silence surprised him. The thought that his presence could possibly be agitating to her, and therefore responsible, drove the blood to his head, and then he rebuked himself for a presumptuous fool. But if he had spoken, he would have had to tell her that he loved her—and it was n't time yet.

But at last he broke against the silence very quietly. "We must talk, one of us—it is so wonderfully quiet that it's alarming."

She turned round to him, and suddenly, so that he stopped in the road and looked at her, she put her hand on his arm.

"We are both so frightfully young," she said.

"Why, yes," he said, laughing at her; "but why not?"

"Why, for the things that we 'll have to do. You for the boys, and I for my poor Mrs. Comber. I had thought when I saw you first that you were going to be old enough, but I don't think you are."

"I know that I can't—" he began.

"Oh! it isn't for anything that you *can't* do!" she broke in. "It's just because you don't see it—why should you? You 're too much in the middle—I suppose it's only outsiders who can really understand. But I get so depressed sometimes with it all that I think that I will leave it and go back to London and never come here again. One doesn't seem to be any use—no use at all. And it all seems worse in the autumn somehow. Poor Mr. Traill! I always happen to be gloomy when you catch me, and I'm not gloomy really in the least."

"But what is it all about? And don't go to London, please. You mustn't think of it."

He was so much in earnest that she turned and looked at him. "Why?" she said gravely. "Do you like my being here?" And then, before he could say anything, she added, reflectively, "Well, that's one, at any rate.

"I have to go in here," she said, stopping before a gate with a drive behind it. "Tea, you understand." Then she gave him her hand. "Although you don't in the least know what I mean, you 're a help," she said; "and I shall look across the chapel floor in the evening and know that I have a friend. Sometimes when I'm down here—out of it—and everything's so fresh and clear, like to-night, I think that it can't be true—the things that go on. Oh! I'm so sorry for them, all of them." She went through the gate and looked back at him. "But I don't want to have to be sorry for you as well—please," she added, and was lost in the trees.

But he, in his triumphant, buoyant sensation of things having moved a step—or even a good many steps further—was ready that she should be sorry or have any sensation whatever so long as she thought of him. Her claiming Chapel-time as a meeting-ground made that somewhat irritating and so swiftly recurrent a ceremonial a thrice-blessed moment to which he might eagerly look forward throughout the day. But it is not my intention to give you all his symptoms—his passion is in no way the chief point; it was simply one of the things that helped in the culminating issue.

Isabel, meanwhile, found that throughout the tea-party her little conversation with Traill ran in her head. It was not a very interesting tea-party—three old ladies who regarded her as something very dangerous and alarming and offered her cake as though they expected it to turn into a bomb in her hands. She looked at their comfortable fire, their dark, cozy drawing-room, their caps and shawls, with the eye of someone whose passage through that country was very swift and whose language was not theirs. The dancing glow of the firelight, the tinkle of the tea-things, the softness of the rugs at her feet, were not the expression of her idea of life, and she flung them away from her and thought of Moffatt's and the night outside. Throughout their soft and courteous speech her mind was with Traill. He had said, "Don't go to London, please," and he had meant it—it was almost as though he had appealed to her from a sudden vision that he had of all that was in front of him. *She* knew, of course—she had seen it happen so very often before; and perceived that for this man, too, with his bright, eager challenge of life, his absurdly young notion of the way that things would be certain to be simple when they were never simple at all, grim, baffling disappointment was at hand. To her those red walls of Moffatt's were alive, moving—crushing, as in some story that she had once read, relentlessly the victims that were hidden within. Perhaps he had suddenly seen or understood something of that—there had come to him some forewarning. Her cheek reddened at the thought and her breath came quickly. She liked him—she had liked him from the first—she liked him very much; and if he wanted her to help him, she would do all that she could. She said good-by to the three old ladies and left them behind her with a little humorous laugh. It was right that there should be three old ladies living like that, so cozily and comfortably, with their fires and their carpets, at the very foot of Moffatt's. How little people realized! These old ladies with their park gates and long drive! How they would roll up in their carriage!… and the Moffatt's!

It was dark, and the long hill that stretched above her was black and ominous. The lights of Moffatt's showed, to the right at the top, and the darker shape of its buildings cut the lighter gray of the sky. There was a lamp-post at the corner of the road, and as she closed the gates behind her with

a clang she heard a voice say, “Good evening, Miss Desart,” and saw that Mr. Perrin was at her side. Mr. Perrin always made her feel nervous, and now, in the dark, she instinctively shrank back, but it was only for an instant, and she was immediately ashamed of her fears. She could not see his face, but she fancied that his voice trembled–he seemed troubled about something; and then that feeling of pity that she had for him before came upon her again, and her voice was softer and more tender.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.