GALSWORTHY JOHN

# THE DARK FLOWER

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*The Dark Flower:*

# Содержание

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*"Take the flower from my breast, I pray thee,*
*Take the flower too from out my tresses;*
*And then go hence, for see, the night is fair,*
*The stars rejoice to watch thee on thy way."*

*– From "The Bard of the Dimbovitza."*

# PART I – SPRING

## I

He walked along Holywell that afternoon of early June with his short gown drooping down his arms, and no cap on his thick dark hair. A youth of middle height, and built as if he had come of two very different strains, one sturdy, the other wiry and light. His face, too, was a curious blend, for, though it was strongly formed, its expression was rather soft and moody. His eyes – dark grey, with a good deal of light in them, and very black lashes – had a way of looking beyond what they saw, so that he did not seem always to be quite present; but his smile was exceedingly swift, uncovering teeth as white as a negro's, and giving his face a peculiar eagerness. People stared at him a little as he passed – since in eighteen hundred and eighty he was before his time in not wearing a cap. Women especially were interested; they perceived that he took no notice of them, seeming rather to be looking into distance, and making combinations in his soul.

Did he know of what he was thinking – did he ever know quite definitely at that time of his life, when things, especially those beyond the immediate horizon, were so curious and interesting? – the things he was going to see and do when he had got through Oxford, where everybody was 'awfully decent'

to him and 'all right' of course, but not so very interesting.

He was on his way to his tutor's to read an essay on Oliver Cromwell; and under the old wall, which had once hedged in the town, he took out of his pocket a beast. It was a small tortoise, and, with an extreme absorption, he watched it move its little inquiring head, feeling it all the time with his short, broad fingers, as though to discover exactly how it was made. It was mighty hard in the back! No wonder poor old Aeschylus felt a bit sick when it fell on his head! The ancients used it to stand the world on – a pagoda world, perhaps, of men and beasts and trees, like that carving on his guardian's Chinese cabinet. The Chinese made jolly beasts and trees, as if they believed in everything having a soul, and not only being just fit for people to eat or drive or make houses of. If only the Art School would let him model things 'on his own,' instead of copying and copying – it was just as if they imagined it would be dangerous to let you think out anything for yourself!

He held the tortoise to his waistcoat, and let it crawl, till, noticing that it was gnawing the corner of his essay, he put it back into his pocket. What would his tutor do if he were to know it was there? – cock his head a little to one side, and say: "Ah! there are things, Lennan, not dreamed of in my philosophy!" Yes, there were a good many not dreamed of by 'old Stormer,' who seemed so awfully afraid of anything that wasn't usual; who seemed always laughing at you, for fear that you should laugh at him. There were lots of people in Oxford like that. It was stupid.

You couldn't do anything decent if you were afraid of being laughed at! Mrs. Stormer wasn't like that; she did things because – they came into her head. But then, of course, she was Austrian, not English, and ever so much younger than old Stormer.

And having reached the door of his tutor's house, he rang the bell…

# II

When Anna Stormer came into the study she found her husband standing at the window with his head a little on one side – a tall, long-legged figure in clothes of a pleasant tweed, and wearing a low turn-over collar (not common in those days) and a blue silk tie, which she had knitted, strung through a ring. He was humming and gently tapping the window-pane with his well-kept finger-nails. Though celebrated for the amount of work he got through, she never caught him doing any in this house of theirs, chosen because it was more than half a mile away from the College which held the 'dear young clowns,' as he called them, of whom he was tutor.

He did not turn – it was not, of course, his habit to notice what was not absolutely necessary – but she felt that he was aware of her. She came to the window seat and sat down. He looked round at that, and said: "Ah!"

It was a murmur almost of admiration, not usual from him, since, with the exception of certain portions of the classics, it was hardly his custom to admire. But she knew that she was looking her best sitting there, her really beautiful figure poised, the sun shining on her brown hair, and brightening her deep-set, ice-green eyes under their black lashes. It was sometimes a great comfort to her that she remained so good-looking. It would have been an added vexation indeed to have felt that she ruffled her

husband's fastidiousness. Even so, her cheekbones were too high for his taste, symbols of that something in her character which did not go with his – the dash of desperation, of vividness, that lack of a certain English smoothness, which always annoyed him.

"Harold!" – she would never quite flatten her r's – "I want to go to the mountains this year."

The mountains! She had not seen them since that season at San Martino di Castrozza twelve years ago, which had ended in her marrying him.

"Nostalgia!"

"I don't know what that means – I am homesick. Can we go?"

"If you like – why not? But no leading up the Cimone della Pala for ME!"

She knew what he meant by that. No romance. How splendidly he had led that day! She had almost worshipped him. What blindness! What distortion! Was it really the same man standing there with those bright, doubting eyes, with grey already in his hair? Yes, romance was over! And she sat silent, looking out into the street – that little old street into which she looked day and night. A figure passed out there, came to the door, and rang.

She said softly: "Here is Mark Lennan!"

She felt her husband's eyes rest on her just for a moment, knew that he had turned, heard him murmur: "Ah, the angel clown!" And, quite still, she waited for the door to open. There was the boy, with his blessed dark head, and his shy, gentle gravity, and his essay in his hand.

"Well, Lennan, and how's old Noll? Hypocrite of genius, eh? Draw up; let's get him over!"

Motionless, from her seat at the window, she watched those two figures at the table – the boy reading in his queer, velvety bass voice; her husband leaning back with the tips of his fingers pressed together, his head a little on one side, and that faint, satiric smile which never reached his eyes. Yes, he was dozing, falling asleep; and the boy, not seeing, was going on. Then he came to the end and glanced up. What eyes he had! Other boys would have laughed; but he looked almost sorry. She heard him murmur: "I'm awfully sorry, sir."

"Ah, Lennan, you caught me! Fact is, term's fagged me out. We're going to the mountains. Ever been to the mountains? What – never! You should come with us, eh? What do you say, Anna? Don't you think this young man ought to come with us?"

She got up, and stood staring at them both. Had she heard aright?

Then she answered – very gravely:

"Yes; I think he ought."

"Good; we'll get HIM to lead up the Cimone della Pala!"

# III

When the boy had said good-bye, and she had watched him out into the street, Anna stood for a moment in the streak of sunlight that came in through the open door, her hands pressed to cheeks which were flaming. Then she shut the door and leaned her forehead against the window-pane, seeing nothing. Her heart beat very fast; she was going over and over again the scene just passed through. This meant so much more than it had seemed to mean…

Though she always had Heimweh, and especially at the end of the summer term, this year it had been a different feeling altogether that made her say to her husband: "I want to go to the mountains!"

For twelve years she had longed for the mountains every summer, but had not pleaded for them; this year she had pleaded, but she did not long for them. It was because she had suddenly realized the strange fact that she did not want to leave England, and the reason for it, that she had come and begged to go. Yet why, when it was just to get away from thought of this boy, had she said: "Yes, I think he ought to come!" Ah! but life for her was always a strange pull between the conscientious and the desperate; a queer, vivid, aching business! How long was it now since that day when he first came to lunch, silent and shy, and suddenly smiling as if he were all lighted up within – the

day when she had said to her husband afterwards: “Ah, he’s an angel!” Not yet a year – the beginning of last October term, in fact. He was different from all the other boys; not that he was a prodigy with untidy hair, ill-fitting clothes, and a clever tongue; but because of something – something – Ah! well – different; because he was – he; because she longed to take his head between her hands and kiss it. She remembered so well the day that longing first came to her. She was giving him tea, it was quite early in the Easter term; he was stroking her cat, who always went to him, and telling her that he meant to be a sculptor, but that his guardian objected, so that, of course, he could not start till he was of age. The lamp on the table had a rose-coloured shade; he had been rowing – a very cold day – and his face was glowing; generally it was rather pale. And suddenly he smiled, and said: “It’s rotten waiting for things, isn’t it?” It was then she had almost stretched out her hands to draw his forehead to her lips. She had thought then that she wanted to kiss him, because it would have been so nice to be his mother – she might just have been his mother, if she had married at sixteen. But she had long known now that she wanted to kiss, not his forehead, but his lips. He was there in her life – a fire in a cold and unaired house; it had even become hard to understand that she could have gone on all these years without him. She had missed him so those six weeks of the Easter vacation, she had revelled so in his three queer little letters, half-shy, half-confidential; kissed them, and worn them in her dress! And in return had written him long, perfectly

correct epistles in her still rather quaint English. She had never let him guess her feelings; the idea that he might shocked her inexpressibly. When the summer term began, life seemed to be all made up of thoughts of him. If, ten years ago, her baby had lived, if its cruel death – after her agony – had not killed for good her wish to have another; if for years now she had not been living with the knowledge that she had no warmth to expect, and that love was all over for her; if life in the most beautiful of all old cities had been able to grip her – there would have been forces to check this feeling. But there was nothing in the world to divert the current. And she was so brimful of life, so conscious of vitality running to sheer waste. Sometimes it had been terrific, that feeling within her, of wanting to live – to find outlet for her energy. So many hundreds of lonely walks she had taken during all these years, trying to lose herself in Nature – hurrying alone, running in the woods, over the fields, where people did not come, trying to get rid of that sense of waste, trying once more to feel as she had felt when a girl, with the whole world before her. It was not for nothing that her figure was superb, her hair so bright a brown, her eyes so full of light. She had tried many distractions. Work in the back streets, music, acting, hunting; given them up one after the other; taken to them passionately again. They had served in the past. But this year they had not served… One Sunday, coming from confession unconfessed, she had faced herself. It was wicked. She would have to kill this feeling – must fly from this boy who moved her so! If she did not

act quickly, she would be swept away. And then the thought had come: Why not? Life was to be lived – not torpidly dozed through in this queer cultured place, where age was in the blood! Life was for love – to be enjoyed! And she would be thirty-six next month! It seemed to her already an enormous age. Thirty-six! Soon she would be old, actually old – and never have known passion! The worship, which had made a hero of the distinguished-looking Englishman, twelve years older than herself, who could lead up the Cimone della Pala, had not been passion. It might, perhaps, have become passion if he had so willed. But he was all form, ice, books. Had he a heart at all, had he blood in his veins? Was there any joy of life in this too beautiful city and these people who lived in it – this place where even enthusiasms seemed to be formal and have no wings, where everything was settled and sophisticated as the very chapels and cloisters? And yet, to have this feeling for a boy – for one almost young enough to be her son! It was so – shameless! That thought haunted her, made her flush in the dark, lying awake at night. And desperately she would pray – for she was devout – pray to be made pure, to be given the holy feelings of a mother, to be filled simply with the sweet sense that she could do everything, suffer anything for him, for his good. After these long prayers she would feel calmed, drowsy, as though she had taken a drug. For hours, perhaps, she would stay like that. And then it would all come over her again. She never thought of his loving her; that would be – unnatural. Why should he love her? She was very humble about it. Ever since that Sunday, when

she avoided the confessional, she had brooded over how to make an end – how to get away from a longing that was too strong for her. And she had hit on this plan – to beg for the mountains, to go back to where her husband had come into her life, and try if this feeling would not die. If it did not, she would ask to be left out there with her own people, away from this danger. And now the fool – the blind fool – the superior fool – with his satiric smile, his everlasting patronage, had driven her to overturn her own plan. Well, let him take the consequences; she had done her best! She would have this one fling of joy, even if it meant that she must stay out there, and never see the boy again!

Standing in her dusky hall, where a faint scent of woodrot crept out into the air, whenever windows and doors were closed, she was all tremulous with secret happiness. To be with him among her mountains, to show him all those wonderful, glittering or tawny crags, to go with him to the top of them and see the kingdoms of the world spread out below; to wander with him in the pine woods, on the Alps in all the scent of the trees and the flowers, where the sun was hot! The first of July; and it was only the tenth of June! Would she ever live so long? They would not go to San Martino this time, rather to Cortina – some new place that had no memories!

She moved from the window, and busied herself with a bowl of flowers. She had heard that humming sound which often heralded her husband's approach, as though warning the world to recover its good form before he reached it. In her happiness she

felt kind and friendly to him. If he had not meant to give her joy, he had nevertheless given it! He came downstairs two at a time, with that air of not being a pedagogue, which she knew so well; and, taking his hat off the stand, half turned round to her.

"Pleasant youth, young Lennan; hope he won't bore us out there!"

His voice seemed to have an accent of compunction, to ask pardon for having issued that impulsive invitation. And there came to her an overwhelming wish to laugh. To hide it, to find excuse for it, she ran up to him, and, pulling his coat lapels till his face was within reach, she kissed the tip of his nose. And then she laughed. And he stood looking at her, with his head just a little on one side, and his eyebrows just a little raised.

# IV

When young Mark heard a soft tapping at his door, though out of bed, he was getting on but dreamily – it was so jolly to watch the mountains lying out in this early light like huge beasts. That one they were going up, with his head just raised above his paws, looked very far away out there! Opening the door an inch, he whispered:

"Is it late?"

"Five o'clock; aren't you ready?"

It was awfully rude of him to keep her waiting! And he was soon down in the empty dining-room, where a sleepy maid was already bringing in their coffee. Anna was there alone. She had on a flax-blue shirt, open at the neck, a short green skirt, and a grey-green velvety hat, small, with one black-cock's feather. Why could not people always wear such nice things, and be as splendid-looking! And he said:

"You do look jolly, Mrs. Stormer!"

She did not answer for so long that he wondered if it had been rude to say that. But she DID look so strong, and swift, and happy-looking.

Down the hill, through a wood of larch-trees, to the river, and across the bridge, to mount at once by a path through hay-fields. How could old Stormer stay in bed on such a morning! The peasant girls in their blue linen skirts were already gathering

into bundles what the men had scythed. One, raking at the edge of a field, paused and shyly nodded to them. She had the face of a Madonna, very calm and grave and sweet, with delicate arched brows – a face it was pure pleasure to see. The boy looked back at her. Everything to him, who had never been out of England before, seemed strange and glamorous. The chalets, with their long wide burnt-brown wooden balconies and low-hanging eaves jutting far beyond the walls; these bright dresses of the peasant women; the friendly little cream-coloured cows, with blunt, smoke-grey muzzles. Even the feel in the air was new, that delicious crisp burning warmth that lay so lightly as it were on the surface of frozen stillness; and the special sweetness of all places at the foot of mountains – scent of pine-gum, burning larch-wood, and all the meadow flowers and grasses. But newest of all was the feeling within him – a sort of pride, a sense of importance, a queer exhilaration at being alone with her, chosen companion of one so beautiful.

They passed all the other pilgrims bound the same way – stout square Germans with their coats slung through straps, who trailed behind them heavy alpenstocks, carried greenish bags, and marched stolidly at a pace that never varied, growling, as Anna and the boy went by: "Aber eilen ist nichts!"

But those two could not go fast enough to keep pace with their spirits. This was no real climb – just a training walk to the top of the Nuvolau; and they were up before noon, and soon again descending, very hungry. When they entered the little dining-

room of the Cinque Torre Hutte, they found it occupied by a party of English people, eating omelettes, who looked at Anna with faint signs of recognition, but did not cease talking in voices that all had a certain half-languid precision, a slight but brisk pinching of sounds, as if determined not to tolerate a drawl, and yet to have one. Most of them had field-glasses slung round them, and cameras were dotted here and there about the room. Their faces were not really much alike, but they all had a peculiar drooping smile, and a particular lift of the eyebrows, that made them seem reproductions of a single type. Their teeth, too, for the most part were a little prominent, as though the drooping of their mouths had forced them forward. They were eating as people eat who distrust the lower senses, preferring not to be compelled to taste or smell.

"From our hotel," whispered Anna; and, ordering red wine and schnitzels, she and the boy sat down. The lady who seemed in command of the English party inquired now how Mr. Stormer was – he was not laid up, she hoped. No? Only lazy? Indeed! He was a great climber, she believed. It seemed to the boy that this lady somehow did not quite approve of them. The talk was all maintained between her, a gentleman with a crumpled collar and puggaree, and a short thick-set grey-bearded man in a dark Norfolk jacket. If any of the younger members of the party spoke, the remark was received with an arch lifting of the brows, and drooping of the lids, as who should say: "Ah! Very promising!"

"Nothing in my life has given me greater pain than to observe the aptitude of human nature for becoming crystallized." It was the lady in command who spoke, and all the young people swayed their faces up and down, as if assenting. How like they were, the boy thought, to guinea-fowl, with their small heads and sloping shoulders and speckly grey coats!

"Ah! my dear lady" – it was the gentleman with the crumpled collar – "you novelists are always girding at the precious quality of conformity. The sadness of our times lies in this questioning spirit. Never was there more revolt, especially among the young. To find the individual judging for himself is a grave symptom of national degeneration. But this is not a subject – "

"Surely, the subject is of the most poignant interest to all young people." Again all the young ones raised their faces and moved them slightly from side to side.

"My dear lady, we are too prone to let the interest that things arouse blind our judgment in regard to the advisability of discussing them. We let these speculations creep and creep until they twine themselves round our faith and paralyze it."

One of the young men interjected suddenly: "Madre" – and was silent.

"I shall not, I think" – it was the lady speaking – "be accused of licence when I say that I have always felt that speculation is only dangerous when indulged in by the crude intelligence. If culture has nothing to give us, then let us have no culture; but if culture be, as I think it, indispensable, then we must accept the

dangers that culture brings."

Again the young people moved their faces, and again the younger of the two young men said: "Madre – "

"Dangers? Have cultured people dangers?"

Who had spoken thus? Every eyebrow was going up, every mouth was drooping, and there was silence. The boy stared at his companion. In what a strange voice she had made that little interjection! There seemed a sort of flame, too, lighted in her eyes. Then the little grey-bearded man said, and his rather whispering voice sounded hard and acid:

"We are all human, my dear madam."

The boy felt his heart go thump at Anna's laugh. It was just as if she had said: "Ah! but not you – surely!" And he got up to follow her towards the door.

The English party had begun already talking – of the weather.

The two walked some way from the 'hut' in silence, before Anna said:

"You didn't like me when I laughed?"

"You hurt their feelings, I think."

"I wanted to – the English Grundys! Ah! don't be cross with me! They WERE English Grundys, weren't they – every one?"

She looked into his face so hard, that he felt the blood rush to his cheeks, and a dizzy sensation of being drawn forward.

"They have no blood, those people! Their voices, their supercilious eyes that look you up and down! Oh! I've had so much of them! That woman with her Liberalism, just as bad as

any. I hate them all!"

He would have liked to hate them, too, since she did; but they had only seemed to him amusing.

"They aren't human. They don't FEEL! Some day you'll know them. They won't amuse you then!"

She went on, in a quiet, almost dreamy voice:

"Why do they come here? It's still young and warm and good out here. Why don't they keep to their Culture, where no one knows what it is to ache and feel hunger, and hearts don't beat. Feel!"

Disturbed beyond measure, the boy could not tell whether it was in her heart or in his hand that the blood was pulsing so. Was he glad or sorry when she let his hand go?

"Ah, well! They can't spoil this day. Let's rest."

At the edge of the larch-wood where they sat, were growing numbers of little mountain pinks, with fringed edges and the sweetest scent imaginable; and she got up presently to gather them. But he stayed where he was, and odd sensations stirred in him. The blue of the sky, the feathery green of the larch-trees, the mountains, were no longer to him what they had been early that morning.

She came back with her hands full of the little pinks, spread her fingers and let them drop. They showered all over his face and neck. Never was so wonderful a scent; never such a strange feeling as they gave him. They clung to his hair, his forehead, his eyes, one even got caught on the curve of his lips; and he stared

up at her through their fringed petals. There must have been something wild in his eyes then, something of the feeling that was stinging his heart, for her smile died; she walked away, and stood with her face turned from him. Confused, and unhappy, he gathered the strewn flowers; and not till he had collected every one did he get up and shyly take them to her, where she still stood, gazing into the depths of the larch-wood.

# V

What did he know of women, that should make him understand? At his public school he had seen none to speak to; at Oxford, only this one. At home in the holidays, not any, save his sister Cicely. The two hobbies of their guardian, fishing, and the antiquities of his native county, rendered him averse to society; so that his little Devonshire manor-house, with its black oak panels and its wild stone-walled park along the river-side was, from year's end to year's end, innocent of all petticoats, save those of Cicely and old Miss Tring, the governess. Then, too, the boy was shy. No, there was nothing in his past, of not yet quite nineteen years, to go by. He was not of those youths who are always thinking of conquests. The very idea of conquest seemed to him vulgar, mean, horrid. There must be many signs indeed before it would come into his head that a woman was in love with him, especially the one to whom he looked up, and thought so beautiful. For before all beauty he was humble, inclined to think himself a clod. It was the part of life which was always unconsciously sacred, and to be approached trembling. The more he admired, the more tremulous and diffident he became. And so, after his one wild moment, when she plucked those sweet-scented blossoms and dropped them over him, he felt abashed; and walking home beside her he was quieter than ever, awkward to the depths of his soul.

If there were confusion in his heart which had been innocent of trouble, what must there have been in hers, that for so long had secretly desired the dawning of that confusion? And she, too, was very silent.

Passing a church with open door in the outskirts of the village, she said:

"Don't wait for me – I want to go in here a little."

In the empty twilight within, one figure, a countrywoman in her black shawl, was kneeling – marvellously still. He would have liked to stay. That kneeling figure, the smile of the sunlight filtering through into the half darkness! He lingered long enough to see Anna, too, go down on her knees in the stillness. Was she praying? Again he had the turbulent feeling with which he had watched her pluck those flowers. She looked so splendid kneeling there! It was caddish to feel like that, when she was praying, and he turned quickly away into the road. But that sharp, sweet stinging sensation did not leave him. He shut his eyes to get rid of her image – and instantly she became ten times more visible, his feeling ten times stronger. He mounted to the hotel; there on the terrace was his tutor. And oddly enough, the sight of him at that moment was no more embarrassing than if it had been the hotel concierge. Stormer did not somehow seem to count; did not seem to want you to count him. Besides, he was so old – nearly fifty!

The man who was so old was posed in a characteristic attitude – hands in the pockets of his Norfolk jacket, one shoulder slightly

raised, head just a little on one side, as if preparing to quiz something. He spoke as Lennan came up, smiling – but not with his eyes.

"Well, young man, and what have you done with my wife?"

"Left her in a church, sir."

"Ah! She will do that! Has she run you off your legs? No? Then let's walk and talk a little."

To be thus pacing up and down and talking with her husband seemed quite natural, did not even interfere with those new sensations, did not in the least increase his shame for having them. He only wondered a little how she could have married him – but so little! Quite far and academic was his wonder – like his wonder in old days how his sister could care to play with dolls. If he had any other feeling, it was just a longing to get away and go down the hill again to the church. It seemed cold and lonely after all that long day with her – as if he had left himself up there, walking along hour after hour, or lying out in the sun beside her. What was old Stormer talking about? The difference between the Greek and Roman views of honour. Always in the past – seemed to think the present was bad form. And he said:

"We met some English Grundys, sir, on the mountain."

"Ah, yes! Any particular brand?"

"Some advanced, and some not; but all the same, I think, really."

"I see. Grundys, I think you said?"

"Yes, sir, from this hotel. It was Mrs. Stormer's name for them.

They were so very superior."

"Quite."

There was something unusual in the tone of that little word. And the boy stared – for the first time there seemed a real man standing there. Then the blood rushed up into his cheeks, for there she was! Would she come up to them? How splendid she was looking, burnt by the sun, and walking as if just starting! But she passed into the hotel without turning her head their way. Had he offended, hurt her? He made an excuse, and got away to his room.

In the window from which that same morning he had watched the mountains lying out like lions in the dim light, he stood again, and gazed at the sun dropping over the high horizon. What had happened to him? He felt so different, so utterly different. It was another world. And the most strange feeling came on him, as of the flowers falling again all over his face and neck and hands, the tickling of their soft-fringed edges, the stinging sweetness of their scent. And he seemed to hear her voice saying: "Feel!" and to feel her heart once more beating under his hand.

# VI

Alone with that black-shawled figure in the silent church, Anna did not pray. Resting there on her knees, she experienced only the sore sensation of revolt. Why had Fate flung this feeling into her heart, lighted up her life suddenly, if God refused her its enjoyment? Some of the mountain pinks remained clinging to her belt, and the scent of them, crushed against her, warred with the faint odour of age and incense. While they were there, with their enticement and their memories, prayer would never come. But did she want to pray? Did she desire the mood of that poor soul in her black shawl, who had not moved by one hair's breadth since she had been watching her, who seemed resting her humble self so utterly, letting life lift from her, feeling the relief of nothingness? Ah, yes! what would it be to have a life so toilsome, so little exciting from day to day and hour to hour, that just to kneel there in wistful stupor was the greatest pleasure one could know? It was beautiful to see her, but it was sad. And there came over Anna a longing to go up to her neighbour and say: "Tell me your troubles; we are both women." She had lost a son, perhaps, some love – or perhaps not really love, only some illusion. Ah! Love… Why should any spirit yearn, why should any body, full of strength and joy, wither slowly away for want of love? Was there not enough in this great world for her, Anna, to have a little? She would not harm him, for she would know

when he had had enough of her; she would surely have the pride and grace then to let him go. For, of course, he would get tired of her. At her age she could never hope to hold a boy more than a few years – months, perhaps. But would she ever hold him at all? Youth was so hard – it had no heart! And then the memory of his eyes came back – gazing up, troubled, almost wild – when she had dropped on him those flowers. That memory filled her with a sort of delirium. One look from her then, one touch, and he would have clasped her to him. She was sure of it, yet scarcely dared to believe what meant so much. And suddenly the torment that she must go through, whatever happened, seemed to her too brutal and undeserved! She rose. Just one gleam of sunlight was still slanting through the doorway; it failed by a yard or so to reach the kneeling countrywoman, and Anna watched. Would it steal on and touch her, or would the sun pass down behind the mountains, and it fade away? Unconscious of that issue, the black-shawled figure knelt, never moving. And the beam crept on. "If it touches her, then he will love me, if only for an hour; if it fades out too soon – " And the beam crept on. That shadowy path of light, with its dancing dust-motes, was it indeed charged with Fate – indeed the augury of Love or Darkness? And, slowly moving, it mounted, the sun sinking; it rose above that bent head, hovered in a golden mist, passed – and suddenly was gone.

Unsteadily, seeing nothing plain, Anna walked out of the church. Why she passed her husband and the boy on the terrace without a look she could not quite have said – perhaps because

the tortured does not salute her torturers. When she reached her room she felt deadly tired, and lying down on her bed, almost at once fell asleep.

She was wakened by a sound, and, recognizing the delicate 'rat-tat' of her husband's knock, did not answer, indifferent whether he came in or no. He entered noiselessly. If she did not let him know she was awake, he would not wake her. She lay still and watched him sit down astride of a chair, cross his arms on its back, rest his chin on them, and fix his eyes on her. Through her veil of eyelashes she had unconsciously contrived that his face should be the one object plainly seen – the more intensely visualized, because of this queer isolation. She did not feel at all ashamed of this mutual fixed scrutiny, in which she had such advantage. He had never shown her what was in him, never revealed what lay behind those bright satiric eyes. Now, perhaps, she would see! And she lay, regarding him with the intense excited absorption with which one looks at a tiny wildflower through a magnifying-lens, and watches its insignificance expanded to the size and importance of a hothouse bloom. In her mind was this thought: He is looking at me with his real self, since he has no reason for armour against me now. At first his eyes seemed masked with their customary brightness, his whole face with its usual decorous formality; then gradually he became so changed that she hardly knew him. That decorousness, that brightness, melted off what lay behind, as frosty dew melts off grass. And her very soul contracted within

her, as if she had become identified with what he was seeing – a something to be passed over, a very nothing. Yes, his was the face of one looking at what was unintelligible, and therefore negligible; at that which had no soul; at something of a different and inferior species and of no great interest to a man. His face was like a soundless avowal of some conclusion, so fixed and intimate that it must surely emanate from the very core of him – be instinctive, unchangeable. This was the real he! A man despising women! Her first thought was: And he's married – what a fate! Her second: If he feels that, perhaps thousands of men do! Am I and all women really what they think us? The conviction in his stare – its through-and-through conviction – had infected her; and she gave in to it for the moment, crushed. Then her spirit revolted with such turbulence, and the blood so throbbed in her, that she could hardly lie still. How dare he think her like that – a nothing, a bundle of soulless inexplicable whims and moods and sensuality? A thousand times, No! It was HE who was the soulless one, the dry, the godless one; who, in his sickening superiority, could thus deny her, and with her all women! That stare was as if he saw her – a doll tricked out in garments labelled soul, spirit, rights, responsibilities, dignity, freedom – all so many words. It was vile, it was horrible, that he should see her thus! And a really terrific struggle began in her between the desire to get up and cry this out, and the knowledge that it would be stupid, undignified, even mad, to show her comprehension of what he would never admit or even understand that he had revealed to

her. And then a sort of cynicism came to her rescue. What a funny thing was married life – to have lived all these years with him, and never known what was at the bottom of his heart! She had the feeling now that, if she went up to him and said: "I am in love with that boy!" it would only make him droop the corners of his mouth and say in his most satiric voice: "Really! That is very interesting!" – would not change in one iota his real thoughts of her; only confirm him in the conviction that she was negligible, inexplicable, an inferior strange form of animal, of no real interest to him.

And then, just when she felt that she could not hold herself in any longer, he got up, passed on tiptoe to the door, opened it noiselessly, and went out.

The moment he had gone, she jumped up. So, then, she was linked to one for whom she, for whom women, did not, as it were, exist! It seemed to her that she had stumbled on knowledge of almost sacred importance, on the key of everything that had been puzzling and hopeless in their married life. If he really, secretly, whole-heartedly despised her, the only feeling she need have for one so dry, so narrow, so basically stupid, was just contempt. But she knew well enough that contempt would not shake what she had seen in his face; he was impregnably walled within his clever, dull conviction of superiority. He was for ever intrenched, and she would always be only the assailant. Though – what did it matter, now?

Usually swift, almost careless, she was a long time that evening

over her toilette. Her neck was very sunburnt, and she lingered, doubtful whether to hide it with powder, or accept her gipsy colouring. She did accept it, for she saw that it gave her eyes, so like glacier ice, under their black lashes, and her hair, with its surprising glints of flame colour, a peculiar value.

When the dinner-bell rang she passed her husband's door without, as usual, knocking, and went down alone.

In the hall she noticed some of the English party of the mountain hut. They did not greet her, conceiving an immediate interest in the barometer; but she could feel them staring at her very hard. She sat down to wait, and at once became conscious of the boy coming over from the other side of the room, rather like a person walking in his sleep. He said not a word. But how he looked! And her heart began to beat. Was this the moment she had longed for? If it, indeed, had come, dared she take it? Then she saw her husband descending the stairs, saw him greet the English party, heard the intoning of their drawl. She looked up at the boy, and said quickly: "Was it a happy day?" It gave her such delight to keep that look on his face, that look as if he had forgotten everything except just the sight of her. His eyes seemed to have in them something holy at that moment, something of the wonder-yearning of Nature and of innocence. It was dreadful to know that in a moment that look must be gone; perhaps never to come back on his face – that look so precious! Her husband was approaching now! Let him see, if he would! Let him see that someone could adore – that she was not to everyone a kind of

lower animal. Yes, he must have seen the boy's face; and yet his expression never changed. He noticed nothing! Or was it that he disdained to notice?

# VII

Then followed for young Lennan a strange time, when he never knew from minute to minute whether he was happy – always trying to be with her, restless if he could not be, sore if she talked with and smiled at others; yet, when he was with her, restless too, unsatisfied, suffering from his own timidity.

One wet morning, when she was playing the hotel piano, and he listening, thinking to have her to himself, there came a young German violinist – pale, and with a brown, thin-waisted coat, longish hair, and little whiskers – rather a beast, in fact. Soon, of course, this young beast was asking her to accompany him – as if anyone wanted to hear him play his disgusting violin! Every word and smile that she gave him hurt so, seeing how much more interesting than himself this foreigner was! And his heart grew heavier and heavier, and he thought: If she likes him I ought not to mind – only, I DO mind! How can I help minding? It was hateful to see her smiling, and the young beast bending down to her. And they were talking German, so that he could not tell what they were saying, which made it more unbearable. He had not known there could be such torture.

And then he began to want to hurt her, too. But that was mean – besides, how could he hurt her? She did not care for him. He was nothing to her – only a boy. If she really thought him only a boy, who felt so old – it would be horrible. It flashed across him

that she might be playing that young violinist against him! No, she never would do that! But the young beast looked just the sort that might take advantage of her smiles. If only he WOULD do something that was not respectful, how splendid it would be to ask him to come for a walk in the woods, and, having told him why, give him a thrashing. Afterwards, he would not tell her, he would not try to gain credit by it. He would keep away till she wanted him back. But suddenly the thought of what he would feel if she really meant to take this young man as her friend in place of him became so actual, so poignant, so horribly painful, that he got up abruptly and went towards the door. Would she not say a word to him before he got out of the room, would she not try and keep him? If she did not, surely it would be all over; it would mean that anybody was more to her than he. That little journey to the door, indeed, seemed like a march to execution. Would she not call after him? He looked back. She was smiling. But HE could not smile; she had hurt him too much! Turning his head away, he went out, and dashed into the rain bareheaded. The feeling of it on his face gave him a sort of dismal satisfaction. Soon he would be wet through. Perhaps he would get ill. Out here, far away from his people, she would have to offer to nurse him; and perhaps – perhaps in his illness he would seem to her again more interesting than that young beast, and then – Ah! if only he could be ill!

He mounted rapidly through the dripping leaves towards the foot of the low mountain that rose behind the hotel. A trail went

up there to the top, and he struck into it, going at a great pace. His sense of injury began dying away; he no longer wanted to be ill. The rain had stopped, the sun came out; he went on, up and up. He would get to the top quicker than anyone ever had! It was something he could do better than that young beast. The pine-trees gave way to stunted larches, and these to pine scrub and bare scree, up which he scrambled, clutching at the tough bushes, terribly out of breath, his heart pumping, the sweat streaming into his eyes. He had no feeling now but wonder whether he would get to the top before he dropped, exhausted. He thought he would die of the beating of his heart; but it was better to die than to stop and be beaten by a few yards. He stumbled up at last on to the little plateau at the top. For full ten minutes he lay there on his face without moving, then rolled over. His heart had given up that terrific thumping; he breathed luxuriously, stretched out his arms along the steaming grass – felt happy. It was wonderful up here, with the sun burning hot in a sky clear-blue already. How tiny everything looked below – hotel, trees, village, chalets – little toy things! He had never before felt the sheer joy of being high up. The rain-clouds, torn and driven in huge white shapes along the mountains to the South, were like an army of giants with chariots and white horses hurrying away. He thought suddenly: "Suppose I had died when my heart pumped so! Would it have mattered the least bit? Everything would be going on just the same, the sun shining, the blue up there the same; and those toy things down in the valley." That jealousy of his an hour ago, why – it was

nothing – he himself nothing! What did it matter if she were nice to that fellow in the brown coat? What did anything matter when the whole thing was so big – and he such a tiny scrap of it?

On the edge of the plateau, to mark the highest point, someone had erected a rude cross, which jutted out stark against the blue sky. It looked cruel somehow, sagged all crooked, and out of place up here; a piece of bad manners, as if people with only one idea had dragged it in, without caring whether or no it suited what was around it. One might just as well introduce one of these rocks into that jolly dark church where he had left her the other day, as put a cross up here.

A sound of bells, and of sniffing and scuffling, roused him; a large grey goat had come up and was smelling at his hair – the leader of a flock, that were soon all round him, solemnly curious, with their queer yellow oblong-pupilled eyes, and their quaint little beards and tails. Awfully decent beasts – and friendly! What jolly things to model! He lay still (having learnt from the fisherman, his guardian, that necessary habit in the presence of all beasts), while the leader sampled the flavour of his neck. The passage of that long rough tongue athwart his skin gave him an agreeable sensation, awakened a strange deep sense of comradeship. He restrained his desire to stroke the creature's nose. It appeared that they now all wished to taste his neck; but some were timid, and the touch of their tongues simply a tickle, so that he was compelled to laugh, and at that peculiar sound they withdrew and gazed at him. There seemed to be no

one with them; then, at a little distance, quite motionless in the shade of a rock, he spied the goatherd, a boy about his own age. How lonely he must be up here all day! Perhaps he talked to his goats. He looked as if he might. One would get to have queer thoughts up here, get to know the rocks, and clouds, and beasts, and what they all meant. The goatherd uttered a peculiar whistle, and something, Lennan could not tell exactly what, happened among the goats – a sort of "Here, Sir!" seemed to come from them. And then the goatherd moved out from the shade and went over to the edge of the plateau, and two of the goats that were feeding there thrust their noses into his hand, and rubbed themselves against his legs. The three looked beautiful standing there together on the edge against the sky…

That night, after dinner, the dining-room was cleared for dancing, so that the guests might feel freedom and gaiety in the air. And, indeed, presently, a couple began sawing up and down over the polished boards, in the apologetic manner peculiar to hotel guests. Then three pairs of Italians suddenly launched themselves into space – twirling and twirling, and glaring into each other's eyes; and some Americans, stimulated by their precept, began airily backing and filling. Two of the 'English Grundys' with carefully amused faces next moved out. To Lennan it seemed that they all danced very well, better than he could. Did he dare ask HER? Then he saw the young violinist go up, saw her rise and take his arm and vanish into the dancing-room; and leaning his forehead against a window-pane, with a sick, beaten

feeling, he stayed, looking out into the moonlight, seeing nothing. He heard his name spoken; his tutor was standing beside him.

"You and I, Lennan, must console each other. Dancing's for the young, eh?"

Fortunately it was the boy's instinct and his training not to show his feelings; to be pleasant, though suffering.

"Yes, sir. Jolly moonlight, isn't it, out there?"

"Ah! very jolly; yes. When I was your age I twirled the light fantastic with the best. But gradually, Lennan, one came to see it could not be done without a partner – there was the rub! Tell me – do you regard women as responsible beings? I should like to have your opinion on that."

It was, of course, ironical – yet there was something in those words – something!

"I think it's you, sir, who ought to give me yours."

"My dear Lennan – my experience is a mere nothing!"

That was meant for unkindness to her! He would not answer. If only Stormer would go away! The music had stopped. They would be sitting out somewhere, talking! He made an effort, and said:

"I was up the hill at the back this morning, where the cross is. There were some jolly goats."

And suddenly he saw her coming. She was alone – flushed, smiling; it struck him that her frock was the same colour as the moonlight.

"Harold, will you dance?"

He would say 'Yes,' and she would be gone again! But his tutor only made her a little bow, and said with that smile of his:

"Lennan and I have agreed that dancing is for the young."

"Sometimes the old must sacrifice themselves. Mark, will you dance?"

Behind him he heard his tutor murmur:

"Ah! Lennan – you betray me!"

That little silent journey with her to the dancing-room was the happiest moment perhaps that he had ever known. And he need not have been so much afraid about his dancing. Truly, it was not polished, but it could not spoil hers, so light, firm, buoyant! It was wonderful to dance with her. Only when the music stopped and they sat down did he know how his head was going round. He felt strange, very strange indeed. He heard her say:

"What is it, dear boy? You look so white!"

Without quite knowing what he did, he bent his face towards the hand that she had laid on his sleeve, then knew no more, having fainted.

# VIII

Growing boy – over-exertion in the morning! That was all! He was himself very quickly, and walked up to bed without assistance. Rotten of him! Never was anyone more ashamed of his little weakness than this boy. Now that he was really a trifle indisposed, he simply could not bear the idea of being nursed at all or tended. Almost rudely he had got away. Only when he was in bed did he remember the look on her face as he left her. How wistful and unhappy, seeming to implore him to forgive her! As if there were anything to forgive! As if she had not made him perfectly happy when she danced with him! He longed to say to her: "If I might be close to you like that one minute every day, then I don't mind all the rest!" Perhaps he would dare say that to-morrow. Lying there he still felt a little funny. He had forgotten to close the ribs of the blinds, and moonlight was filtering in; but he was too idle, too drowsy to get up now and do it. They had given him brandy, rather a lot – that perhaps was the reason he felt so queer; not ill, but mazy, as if dreaming, as if he had lost the desire ever to move again. Just to lie there, and watch the powdery moonlight, and hear faraway music throbbing down below, and still feel the touch of her, as in the dance she swayed against him, and all the time to have the scent about him of flowers! His thoughts were dreams, his dreams thoughts – all precious unreality. And then it seemed to him that the moonlight

was gathered into a single slip of pallor – there was a thrumming, a throbbing, and that shape of moonlight moved towards him. It came so close that he felt its warmth against his brow; it sighed, hovered, drew back soundless, and was gone. He must have fallen then into dreamless sleep…

What time was it when he was awakened by that delicate 'rat-tat' to see his tutor standing in the door-way with a cup of tea?

Was young Lennan all right? Yes, he was perfectly all right – would be down directly! It was most frightfully good of Mr. Stormer to come! He really didn't want anything.

Yes, yes; but the maimed and the halt must be attended to!

His face seemed to the boy very kind just then – only to laugh at him a very little – just enough. And it was awfully decent of him to have come, and to stand there while he drank the tea. He was really all right, but for a little headache. Many times while he was dressing he stood still, trying to remember. That white slip of moonlight? Was it moonlight? Was it part of a dream; or was it, could it have been she, in her moonlight-coloured frock? Why had he not stayed awake? He would not dare to ask her, and now would never know whether the vague memory of warmth on his brow had been a kiss.

He breakfasted alone in the room where they had danced. There were two letters for him. One from his guardian enclosing money, and complaining of the shyness of the trout; the other from his sister. The man she was engaged to – he was a budding diplomat, attached to the Embassy at Rome – was afraid that his

leave was going to be curtailed. They would have to be married at once. They might even have to get a special licence. It was lucky Mark was coming back so soon. They simply MUST have him for best man. The only bridesmaid now would be Sylvia… Sylvia Doone? Why, she was only a kid! And the memory of a little girl in a very short holland frock, with flaxen hair, pretty blue eyes, and a face so fair that you could almost see through it, came up before him. But that, of course, was six years ago; she would not still be in a frock that showed her knees, or wear beads, or be afraid of bulls that were never there. It was stupid being best man – they might have got some decent chap! And then he forgot all – for there was SHE, out on the terrace. In his rush to join her he passed several of the 'English Grundys,' who stared at him askance. Indeed, his conduct of the night before might well have upset them. An Oxford man, fainting in an hotel! Something wrong there!.

And then, when he reached her, he did find courage.

"Was it really moonlight?"

"All moonlight."

"But it was warm!"

And, when she did not answer that, he had within him just the same light, intoxicated feeling as after he had won a race at school.

But now came a dreadful blow. His tutor's old guide had suddenly turned up, after a climb with a party of Germans. The war-horse had been aroused in Stormer. He wished to start that

afternoon for a certain hut, and go up a certain peak at dawn next day. But Lennan was not to go. Why not? Because of last night's faint; and because, forsooth, he was not some stupid thing they called 'an expert.' As if – ! Where she could go he could! This was to treat him like a child. Of course he could go up this rotten mountain. It was because she did not care enough to take him! She did not think him man enough! Did she think that he could not climb what – her husband – could? And if it were dangerous SHE ought not to be going, leaving him behind – that was simply cruel! But she only smiled, and he flung away from her, not having seen that all this grief of his only made her happy.

And that afternoon they went off without him. What deep, dark thoughts he had then! What passionate hatred of his own youth! What schemes he wove, by which she might come back, and find him gone-up some mountain far more dangerous and fatiguing! If people did not think him fit to climb with, he would climb by himself. That, anyway, everyone admitted, was dangerous. And it would be her fault. She would be sorry then. He would get up, and be off before dawn; he put his things out ready, and filled his flask. The moonlight that evening was more wonderful than ever, the mountains like great ghosts of themselves. And she was up there at the hut, among them! It was very long before he went to sleep, brooding over his injuries – intending not to sleep at all, so as to be ready to be off at three o'clock. At NINE o'clock he woke. His wrath was gone; he only felt restless and ashamed. If, instead of flying out, he had made

the best of it, he could have gone with them as far as the hut, could have stayed the night there. And now he cursed himself for being such a fool and idiot. Some little of that idiocy he could, perhaps, retrieve. If he started for the hut at once, he might still be in time to meet them coming down, and accompany them home. He swallowed his coffee, and set off. He knew the way at first, then in woods lost it, recovered the right track again at last, but did not reach the hut till nearly two o'clock. Yes, the party had made the ascent that morning – they had been seen, been heard jodelling on the top. Gewiss! Gewiss! But they would not come down the same way. Oh, no! They would be going home down to the West and over the other pass. They would be back in house before the young Herr himself.

He heard this, oddly, almost with relief. Was it the long walk alone, or being up there so high? Or simply that he was very hungry? Or just these nice friendly folk in the hut, and their young daughter with her fresh face, queer little black cloth sailor hat with long ribbons, velvet bodice, and perfect simple manners; or the sight of the little silvery-dun cows, thrusting their broad black noses against her hand? What was it that had taken away from him all his restless feeling, made him happy and content?.. He did not know that the newest thing always fascinates the puppy in its gambols! … He sat a long while after lunch, trying to draw the little cows, watching the sun on the cheek of that pretty maiden, trying to talk to her in German. And when at last he said: "Adieu!" and she murmured "Kuss die Hand. Adieu!" there was

quite a little pang in his heart… Wonderful and queer is the heart of a man!.. For all that, as he neared home he hastened, till he was actually running. Why had he stayed so long up there? She would be back – she would expect to see him; and that young beast of a violinist would be with her, perhaps, instead! He reached the hotel just in time to rush up and dress, and rush down to dinner. Ah! They were tired, no doubt – were resting in their rooms. He sat through dinner as best he could; got away before dessert, and flew upstairs. For a minute he stood there doubtful; on which door should he knock? Then timidly he tapped on hers. No answer! He knocked loud on his tutor's door. No answer! They were not back, then. Not back? What could that mean? Or could it be that they were both asleep? Once more he knocked on her door; then desperately turned the handle, and took a flying glance. Empty, tidy, untouched! Not back! He turned and ran downstairs again. All the guests were streaming out from dinner, and he became entangled with a group of 'English Grundys' discussing a climbing accident which had occurred in Switzerland. He listened, feeling suddenly quite sick. One of them, the short grey-bearded Grundy with the rather whispering voice, said to him: "All alone again to-night? The Stormers not back?" Lennan did his best to answer, but something had closed his throat; he could only shake his head.

"They had a guide, I think?" said the 'English Grundy.'

This time Lennan managed to get out: "Yes, sir."

"Stormer, I fancy, is quite an expert!" and turning to the lady

whom the young 'Grundys' addressed as 'Madre' he added:

"To me the great charm of mountain-climbing was always the freedom from people – the remoteness."

The mother of the young 'Grundys,' looking at Lennan with her half-closed eyes, answered:

"That, to me, would be the disadvantage; I always like to be mixing with my own kind."

The grey-bearded 'Grundy' murmured in a muffled voice:

"Dangerous thing, that, to say – in an hotel!"

And they went on talking, but of what Lennan no longer knew, lost in this sudden feeling of sick fear. In the presence of these 'English Grundys,' so superior to all vulgar sensations, he could not give vent to his alarm; already they viewed him as unsound for having fainted. Then he grasped that there had begun all round him a sort of luxurious speculation on what might have happened to the Stormers. The descent was very nasty; there was a particularly bad traverse. The 'Grundy,' whose collar was not now crumpled, said he did not believe in women climbing. It was one of the signs of the times that he most deplored. The mother of the young 'Grundys' countered him at once: In practice she agreed that they were out of place, but theoretically she could not see why they should not climb. An American standing near threw all into confusion by saying he guessed that it might be liable to develop their understandings. Lennan made for the front door. The moon had just come up over in the South, and exactly under it he could see their mountain. What visions he had then! He saw

her lying dead, saw himself climbing down in the moonlight and raising her still-living, but half-frozen, form from some perilous ledge. Even that was almost better than this actuality of not knowing where she was, or what had happened. People passed out into the moonlight, looking curiously at his set face staring so fixedly. One or two asked him if he were anxious, and he answered: "Oh no, thanks!" Soon there would have to be a search party. How soon? He would, he must be, of it! They should not stop him this time. And suddenly he thought: Ah, it is all because I stayed up there this afternoon talking to that girl, all because I forgot HER!

And then he heard a stir behind him. There they were, coming down the passage from a side door – she in front with her alpenstock and rucksack – smiling. Instinctively he recoiled behind some plants. They passed. Her sunburned face, with its high cheek-bones and its deep-set eyes, looked so happy; smiling, tired, triumphant. Somehow he could not bear it, and when they were gone by he stole out into the wood and threw himself down in shadow, burying his face, and choking back a horrible dry sobbing that would keep rising in his throat.

# IX

Next day he was happy; for all the afternoon he lay out in the shade of that same wood at her feet, gazing up through larch-boughs. It was so wonderful, with nobody but Nature near. Nature so alive, and busy, and so big!

Coming down from the hut the day before, he had seen a peak that looked exactly like the figure of a woman with a garment over her head, the biggest statue in the world; from further down it had become the figure of a bearded man, with his arm bent over his eyes. Had she seen it? Had she noticed how all the mountains in moonlight or very early morning took the shape of beasts? What he wanted most in life was to be able to make images of beasts and creatures of all sorts, that were like – that had – that gave out the spirit of – Nature; so that by just looking at them one could have all those jolly feelings one had when one was watching trees, and beasts, and rocks, and even some sorts of men – but not 'English Grundys.'

So he was quite determined to study Art?

Oh yes, of course!

He would want to leave – Oxford, then!

No, oh no! Only some day he would have to.

She answered: "Some never get away!"

And he said quickly: "Of course, I shall never want to leave Oxford while you are there."

He heard her draw her breath in sharply.

"Oh yes, you will! Now help me up!" And she led the way back to the hotel.

He stayed out on the terrace when she had gone in, restless and unhappy the moment he was away from her. A voice close by said:

"Well, friend Lennan – brown study, or blue devils, which?"

There, in one of those high wicker chairs that insulate their occupants from the world, he saw his tutor leaning back, head a little to one side, and tips of fingers pressed together. He looked like an idol sitting there inert, and yet – yesterday he had gone up that mountain!

"Cheer up! You will break your neck yet! When I was your age, I remember feeling it deeply that I was not allowed to risk the lives of others."

Lennan stammered out:

"I didn't think of that; but I thought where Mrs. Stormer could go, I could."

"Ah! For all our admiration we cannot quite admit – can we, when it comes to the point?"

The boy's loyalty broke into flame:

"It's not that. I think Mrs. Stormer as good as any man – only – only – "

"Not quite so good as you, eh?"

"A hundred times better, sir."

Stormer smiled. Ironic beast!

"Lennan," he said, "distrust hyperbole."

"Of course, I know I'm no good at climbing," the boy broke out again; "but – but – I thought where she was allowed to risk her life, I ought to be!"

"Good! I like that." It was said so entirely without irony for once, that the boy was disconcerted.

"You are young, Brother Lennan," his tutor went on. "Now, at what age do you consider men develop discretion? Because, there is just one thing always worth remembering – women have none of that better part of valour."

"I think women are the best things in the world," the boy blurted out.

"May you long have that opinion!" His tutor had risen, and was ironically surveying his knees. "A bit stiff!" he said. "Let me know when you change your views!"

"I never shall, sir."

"Ah, ah! Never is a long word, Lennan. I am going to have some tea;" and gingerly he walked away, quizzing, as it were, with a smile, his own stiffness.

Lennan remained where he was, with burning cheeks. His tutor's words again had seemed directed against her. How could a man say such things about women! If they were true, he did not want to know; if they were not true, it was wicked to say them. It must be awful never to have generous feelings; always to have to be satirical. Dreadful to be like the 'English Grundys'; only different, of course, because, after all, old Stormer was much

more interesting and intelligent – ever so much more; only, just as 'superior.' "Some never get away!" Had she meant – from that superiority? Just down below were a family of peasants scything and gathering in the grass. One could imagine her doing that, and looking beautiful, with a coloured handkerchief over her head; one could imagine her doing anything simple – one could not imagine old Stormer doing anything but what he did do. And suddenly the boy felt miserable, oppressed by these dim glimmerings of lives misplaced. And he resolved that he would not be like Stormer when he was old! No, he would rather be a regular beast than be like that!.

When he went to his room to change for dinner he saw in a glass of water a large clove carnation. Who had put it there? Who could have put it there – but she? It had the same scent as the mountain pinks she had dropped over him, but deeper, richer – a scent moving, dark, and sweet. He put his lips to it before he pinned it into his coat.

There was dancing again that night – more couples this time, and a violin beside the piano; and she had on a black frock. He had never seen her in black. Her face and neck were powdered over their sunburn. The first sight of that powder gave him a faint shock. He had not somehow thought that ladies ever put on powder. But if SHE did – then it must be right! And his eyes never left her. He saw the young German violinist hovering round her, even dancing with her twice; watched her dancing with others, but all without jealousy, without troubling; all in a

sort of dream. What was it? Had he been bewitched into that queer state, bewitched by the gift of that flower in his coat? What was it, when he danced with her, that kept him happy in her silence and his own? There was no expectation in him of anything that she would say, or do – no expectation, no desire. Even when he wandered out with her on to the terrace, even when they went down the bank and sat on a bench above the fields where the peasants had been scything, he had still no feeling but that quiet, dreamy adoration. The night was black and dreamy too, for the moon was still well down behind the mountains. The little band was playing the next waltz; but he sat, not moving, not thinking, as if all power of action and thought had been stolen out of him. And the scent of the flower in his coat rose, for there was no wind. Suddenly his heart stopped beating. She had leaned against him, he felt her shoulder press his arm, her hair touch his cheek. He closed his eyes then, and turned his face to her. He felt her lips press his mouth with a swift, burning kiss. He sighed, stretched out his arms. There was nothing there but air. The rustle of her dress against the grass was all! The flower – it, too, was gone.

# X

Not one minute all that night did Anna sleep. Was it remorse that kept her awake, or the intoxication of memory? If she felt that her kiss had been a crime, it was not against her husband or herself, but against the boy – the murder of illusion, of something sacred. But she could not help feeling a delirious happiness too, and the thought of trying to annul what she had done did not even occur to her.

He was ready, then, to give her a little love! Ever so little, compared to hers, but still a little! There could be no other meaning to that movement of his face with the closed eyes, as if he would nestle it down on her breast.

Was she ashamed of her little manoeuvres of these last few days – ashamed of having smiled at the young violinist, of that late return from the mountain climb, of the flower she had given him, of all the conscious siege she had laid since the evening her husband came in and sat watching her, without knowing that she saw him? No; not really ashamed! Her remorse rose only from the kiss. It hurt to think of that, because it was death, the final extinction of the mother-feeling in her; the awakening of – who knew what – in the boy! For if she was mysterious to him, what was he not to her, with his eagerness, and his dreaminess, his youthful warmth, his innocence! What if it had killed in him trust, brushed off the dew, tumbled a star down? Could she

forgive herself for that? Could she bear it if she were to make him like so many other boys, like that young violinist; just a cynical youth, looking on women as what they called 'fair game'? But COULD she make him into such – would he ever grow like that? Oh! surely not; or she would not have loved him from the moment she first set eyes on him and spoke of him as 'an angel.'

After that kiss – that crime, if it were one – in the dark she had not known what he had done, where gone – perhaps wandering, perhaps straight up to his room. Why had she refrained, left him there, vanished out of his arms? This she herself hardly understood. Not shame; not fear; reverence perhaps – for what? For love – for the illusion, the mystery, all that made love beautiful; for youth, and the poetry of it; just for the sake of the black still night itself, and the scent of that flower – dark flower of passion that had won him to her, and that she had stolen back, and now wore all night long close to her neck, and in the morning placed withered within her dress. She had been starved so long, and so long waited for that moment – it was little wonder if she did not clearly know why she had done just this, and not that!

And now how should she meet him, how first look into his eyes? Would they have changed? Would they no longer have the straight look she so loved? It would be for her to lead, to make the future. And she kept saying to herself: I am not going to be afraid. It is done. I will take what life offers! Of her husband she did not think at all.

But the first moment she saw the boy, she knew that

something from outside, and untoward, had happened since that kiss. He came up to her, indeed, but he said nothing, stood trembling all over and handed her a telegram that contained these words: "Come back at once Wedding immediate Expect you day after to-morrow. Cicely." The words grew indistinct even as she read them, and the boy's face all blurred. Then, making an effort, she said quietly:

"Of course, you must go. You cannot miss your only sister's wedding."

Without protest he looked at her; and she could hardly bear that look – it seemed to know so little, and ask so much. She said: "It is nothing – only a few days. You will come back, or we will come to you."

His face brightened at once.

"Will you really come to us soon, at once – if they ask you? Then I don't mind – I – I – " And then he stopped, choking.

She said again:

"Ask us. We will come."

He seized her hand; pressed and pressed it in both his own, then stroked it gently, and said:

"Oh! I'm hurting it!"

She laughed, not wishing to cry.

In a few minutes he would have to start to catch the only train that would get him home in time.

She went and helped him to pack. Her heart felt like lead, but, not able to bear that look on his face again, she kept cheerfully

talking of their return, asking about his home, how to get to it, speaking of Oxford and next term. When his things were ready she put her arms round his neck, and for a moment pressed him to her. Then she escaped. Looking back from his door, she saw him standing exactly as when she had withdrawn her arms. Her cheeks were wet; she dried them as she went downstairs. When she felt herself safe, she went out on the terrace. Her husband was there, and she said to him:

"Will you come with me into the town? I want to buy some things."

He raised his eyebrows, smiled dimly, and followed her. They walked slowly down the hill into the long street of the little town. All the time she talked of she knew not what, and all the time she thought: His carriage will pass – his carriage will pass!

Several carriages went jingling by. At last he came. Sitting there, and staring straight before him, he did not see them. She heard her husband say:

"Hullo! Where is our young friend Lennan off to, with his luggage – looking like a lion cub in trouble?"

She answered in a voice that she tried to make clear and steady:

"There must be something wrong; or else it is his sister's wedding."

She felt that her husband was gazing at her, and wondered what her face was like; but at that moment the word "Madre!" sounded close in her ear and they were surrounded by a small

drove of ‘English Grundys.’

# XI

That twenty mile drive was perhaps the worst part of the journey for the boy. It is always hard to sit still and suffer.

When Anna left him the night before, he had wandered about in the dark, not knowing quite where he went. Then the moon came up, and he found himself sitting under the eave of a barn close to a chalet where all was dark and quiet; and down below him the moon-whitened valley village – its roofs and spires and little glamorous unreal lights.

In his evening suit, his dark ruffled hair uncovered, he would have made a quaint spectacle for the owners of that chalet, if they had chanced to see him seated on the hay-strewn boards against their barn, staring before him with such wistful rapture. But they were folk to whom sleep was precious…

And now it was all snatched away from him, relegated to some immensely far-off future. Would it indeed be possible to get his guardian to ask them down to Hayle? And would they really come? His tutor would surely never care to visit a place right away in the country – far from books and everything! He frowned, thinking of his tutor, but it was with perplexity – no other feeling. And yet, if he could not have them down there, how could he wait the two whole months till next term began! So went his thoughts, round and round, while the horses jogged, dragging him further and further from her.

It was better in the train; the distraction of all the strange crowd of foreigners, the interest of new faces and new country; and then sleep – a long night of it, snoozed up in his corner, thoroughly fagged out. And next day more new country, more new faces; and slowly, his mood changing from ache and bewilderment to a sense of something promised, delightful to look forward to. Then Calais at last, and a night-crossing in a wet little steamer, a summer gale blowing spray in his face, waves leaping white in a black sea, and the wild sound of the wind. On again to London, the early drive across the town, still sleepy in August haze; an English breakfast – porridge, chops, marmalade. And, at last, the train for home. At all events he could write to her, and tearing a page out of his little sketch-book, he began:

"I am writing in the train, so please forgive this joggly writing – "

Then he did not know how to go on, for all that he wanted to say was such as he had never even dreamed of writing – things about his feelings which would look horrible in words; besides, he must not put anything that might not be read, by anyone, so what was there to say?

"It has been such a long journey," he wrote at last, "away from the Tyrol;" (he did not dare even to put "from you,") "I thought it would never end. But at last it has – very nearly. I have thought a great deal about the Tyrol. It was a lovely time – the loveliest time I have ever had. And now it's over, I try to console myself by thinking of the future, but not the immediate future – THAT

is not very enjoyable. I wonder how the mountains are looking to-day. Please give my love to them, especially the lion ones that come and lie out in the moonlight – you will not recognize them from this" – then followed a sketch. "And this is the church we went to, with someone kneeling. And this is meant for the 'English Grundys,' looking at someone who is coming in very late with an alpenstock – only, I am better at the 'English Grundys' than at the person with the alpenstock. I wish I were the 'English Grundys' now, still in the Tyrol. I hope I shall get a letter from you soon; and that it will say you are getting ready to come back. My guardian will be awfully keen for you to come and stay with us. He is not half bad when you know him, and there will be his sister, Mrs. Doone, and her daughter left there after the wedding. It will be simply disgusting if you and Mr. Stormer don't come. I wish I could write all I feel about my lovely time in the Tyrol, but you must please imagine it."

And just as he had not known how to address her, so he could not tell how to subscribe himself, and only put "Mark Lennan."

He posted the letter at Exeter, where he had some time to wait; and his mind moved still more from past to future. Now that he was nearing home he began to think of his sister. In two days she would be gone to Italy; he would not see her again for a long time, and a whole crowd of memories began to stretch out hands to him. How she and he used to walk together in the walled garden, and on the sunk croquet ground; she telling him stories, her arm round his neck, because she was two years older, and

taller than he in those days. Their first talk each holidays, when he came back to her; the first tea – with unlimited jam – in the old mullion-windowed, flower-chintzed schoolroom, just himself and her and old Tingle (Miss Tring, the ancient governess, whose chaperonage would now be gone), and sometimes that kid Sylvia, when she chanced to be staying there with her mother. Cicely had always understood him when he explained to her how inferior school was, because nobody took any interest in beasts or birds except to kill them; or in drawing, or making things, or anything decent. They would go off together, rambling along the river, or up the park, where everything looked so jolly and wild – the ragged oak-trees, and huge boulders, of whose presence old Godden, the coachman, had said: "I can't think but what these ha' been washed here by the Flood, Mast' Mark!" These and a thousand other memories beset his conscience now. And as the train drew closer to their station, he eagerly made ready to jump out and greet her. There was the honeysuckle full out along the paling of the platform over the waiting-room; wonderful, this year – and there was she, standing alone on the platform. No, it was not Cicely! He got out with a blank sensation, as if those memories had played him false. It was a girl, indeed, but she only looked about sixteen, and wore a sunbonnet that hid her hair and half her face. She had on a blue frock, and some honeysuckle in her waist-belt. She seemed to be smiling at him, and expecting him to smile at her; and so he did smile. She came up to him then, and said:

"I'm Sylvia."

He answered: "Oh! thanks awfully – it was awfully good of you to come and meet me."

"Cicely's so busy. It's only the T-cart. Have you got much luggage?"

She took up his hold-all, and he took it from her; she took his bag, and he took it from her; then they went out to the T-cart. A small groom stood there, holding a silver-roan cob with a black mane and black swish tail.

She said: "D'you mind if I drive, because I'm learning."

And he answered: "Oh, no! rather not."

She got up; he noticed that her eyes looked quite excited. Then his portmanteau came out and was deposited with the other things behind; and he got up beside her.

She said: "Let go, Billy."

The roan rushed past the little groom, whose top boots seemed to twinkle as he jumped up behind. They whizzed round the corner from the station yard, and observing that her mouth was just a little open as though this had disconcerted her, he said:

"He pulls a bit."

"Yes – but isn't he perfectly sweet?"

"He IS rather decent."

Ah! when SHE came, he would drive her; they would go off alone in the T-cart, and he would show her all the country round.

He was re-awakened by the words:

"Oh! I know he's going to shy!" At once there was a swerve.

The roan was cantering.

They had passed a pig.

"Doesn't he look lovely now? Ought I to have whipped him when he shied?"

"Rather not."

"Why?"

"Because horses are horses, and pigs are pigs; it's natural for horses to shy at them."

"Oh!"

He looked up at her then, sidelong. The curve of her cheek and chin looked very soft, and rather jolly.

"I didn't know you, you know!" he said. "You've grown up so awfully."

"I knew you at once. Your voice is still furry."

There was another silence, till she said:

"He does pull, rather – doesn't he, going home?"

"Shall I drive?"

"Yes, please."

He stood up and took the reins, and she slipped past under them in front of him; her hair smelt exactly like hay, as she was softly bumped against him.

She kept regarding him steadily with very blue eyes, now that she was relieved of driving.

"Cicely was afraid you weren't coming," she said suddenly. "What sort of people are those old Stormers?"

He felt himself grow very red, choked something down, and

answered:

"It's only he that's old. She's not more than about thirty-five."

"That IS old."

He restrained the words: "Of course it's old to a kid like you!" And, instead, he looked at her. Was she exactly a kid? She seemed quite tall (for a girl) and not very thin, and there was something frank and soft about her face, and as if she wanted you to be nice to her.

"Is she very pretty?"

This time he did not go red, such was the disturbance that question made in him. If he said: "Yes," it was like letting the world know his adoration; but to say anything less would be horrible, disloyal. So he did say: "Yes," listening hard to the tone of his own voice.

"I thought she was. Do you like her very much?" Again he struggled with that thing in his throat, and again said: "Yes."

He wanted to hate this girl, yet somehow could not – she looked so soft and confiding. She was staring before her now, her lips still just parted, so evidently THAT had not been because of Bolero's pulling; they were pretty all the same, and so was her short, straight little nose, and her chin, and she was awfully fair. His thoughts flew back to that other face – so splendid, so full of life. Suddenly he found himself unable to picture it – for the first time since he had started on his journey it would not come before him.

"Oh! Look!"

Her hand was pulling at his arm. There in the field over the hedge a buzzard hawk was dropping like a stone.

"Oh, Mark! Oh! Oh! It's got it!"

She was covering her face with both her hands, and the hawk, with a young rabbit in its claws, was sailing up again. It looked so beautiful that he did not somehow feel sorry for the rabbit; but he wanted to stroke and comfort her, and said:

"It's all right, Sylvia; it really is. The rabbit's dead already, you know. And it's quite natural."

She took her hands away from a face that looked just as if she were going to cry.

"Poor little rabbit! It was such a little one!"

# XII

On the afternoon of the day following he sat in the smoking-room with a prayer book in his hand, and a frown on his forehead, reading the Marriage Service. The book had been effectively designed for not spoiling the figure when carried in a pocket. But this did not matter, for even if he could have read the words, he would not have known what they meant, seeing that he was thinking how he could make a certain petition to a certain person sitting just behind at a large bureau with a sliding top, examining artificial flies.

He fixed at last upon this form:

"Gordy!" (Why Gordy no one quite knew now – whether because his name was George, or by way of corruption from Guardian.) "When Cis is gone it'll be rather awful, won't it?"

"Not a bit."

Mr. Heatherley was a man of perhaps sixty-four, if indeed guardians have ages, and like a doctor rather than a squire; his face square and puffy, his eyes always half-closed, and his curly mouth using bluntly a voice of that refined coarseness peculiar to people of old family.

"But it will, you know!"

"Well, supposin' it is?"

"I only wondered if you'd mind asking Mr. and Mrs. Stormer to come here for a little – they were awfully kind to me out there."

"Strange man and woman! My dear fellow!"

"Mr. Stormer likes fishing."

"Does he? And what does she like?"

Very grateful that his back was turned, the boy said:

"I don't know – anything – she's awfully nice."

"Ah! Pretty?"

He answered faintly:

"I don't know what YOU call pretty, Gordy."

He felt, rather than saw, his guardian scrutinizing him with those half-closed eyes under their gouty lids.

"All right; do as you like. Have 'em here and have done with it, by all means."

Did his heart jump? Not quite; but it felt warm and happy, and he said:

"Thanks awfully, Gordy. It's most frightfully decent of you," and turned again to the Marriage Service. He could make out some of it. In places it seemed to him fine, and in other places queer. About obeying, for instance. If you loved anybody, it seemed rotten to expect them to obey you. If you loved them and they loved you, there couldn't ever be any question of obeying, because you would both do the things always of your own accord. And if they didn't love you, or you them, then – oh! then it would be simply too disgusting for anything, to go on living with a person you didn't love or who didn't love you. But of course SHE didn't love his tutor. Had she once? Those bright doubting eyes, that studiously satiric mouth came very clearly up before him.

You could not love them; and yet – he was really very decent. A feeling as of pity, almost of affection, rose in him for his remote tutor. It was queer to feel so, since the last time they had talked together out there, on the terrace, he had not felt at all like that.

The noise of the bureau top sliding down aroused him; Mr. Heatherley was closing in the remains of the artificial flies. That meant he would be going out to fish. And the moment he heard the door shut, Mark sprang up, slid back the bureau top, and began to write his letter. It was hard work.

"DEAR MRS. STORMER,

"My guardian wishes me to beg you and Mr. Stormer to pay us a visit as soon as you come back from the Tyrol. Please tell Mr. Stormer that only the very best fishermen – like him – can catch our trout; the rest catch our trees. This is me catching our trees (here followed a sketch). My sister is going to be married to-morrow, and it will be disgusting afterwards unless you come. So do come, please. And with my very best greetings,

"I am,

"Your humble servant,

"M. LENNAN."

When he had stamped this production and dropped it in the letter-box, he had the oddest feeling, as if he had been let out of school; a desire to rush about, to frolic. What should he do? Cis, of course, would be busy – they were all busy about the wedding. He would go and saddle Bolero, and jump him in the park; or should he go down along the river and watch the jays?

Both seemed lonely occupations. And he stood in the window – dejected. At the age of five, walking with his nurse, he had been overheard remarking: "Nurse, I want to eat a biscuit – ALL THE WAY I want to eat a biscuit!" and it was still rather so with him perhaps – all the way he wanted to eat a biscuit. He bethought him then of his modelling, and went out to the little empty greenhouse where he kept his masterpieces. They seemed to him now quite horrible – and two of them, the sheep and the turkey, he marked out for summary destruction. The idea occurred to him that he might try and model that hawk escaping with the little rabbit; but when he tried, no nice feeling came, and flinging the things down he went out. He ran along the unweeded path to the tennis ground – lawn tennis was then just coming in. The grass looked very rough. But then, everything about that little manor house was left rather wild and anyhow; why, nobody quite knew, and nobody seemed to mind. He stood there scrutinizing the condition of the ground. A sound of humming came to his ears. He got up on the wall. There was Sylvia sitting in the field, making a wreath of honeysuckle. He stood very quiet and listened. She looked pretty – lost in her tune. Then he slid down off the wall, and said gently:

"Hallo!"

She looked round at him, her eyes very wide open.

"Your voice is jolly, Sylvia!"

"Oh, no!"

"It is. Come and climb a tree!"

"Where?"

"In the park, of course."

They were some time selecting the tree, many being too easy for him, and many too hard for her; but one was found at last, an oak of great age, and frequented by rooks. Then, insisting that she must be roped to him, he departed to the house for some blind-cord. The climb began at four o'clock – named by him the ascent of the Cimone della Pala. He led the momentous expedition, taking a hitch of the blind-cord round a branch before he permitted her to move. Two or three times he was obliged to make the cord fast and return to help her, for she was not an 'expert'; her arms seemed soft, and she was inclined to straddle instead of trusting to one foot. But at last they were settled, streaked indeed with moss, on the top branch but two. They rested there, silent, listening to the rooks soothing an outraged dignity. Save for this slowly subsiding demonstration it was marvellously peaceful and remote up there, half-way to a blue sky thinly veiled from them by the crinkled brown-green leaves. The peculiar dry mossy smell of an oak-tree was disturbed into the air by the least motion of their feet or hands against the bark. They could hardly see the ground, and all around, other gnarled trees barred off any view.

He said:

"If we stay up here till it's dark we might see owls."

"Oh, no! Owls are horrible!"

"What! They're LOVELY – especially the white ones."

"I can't stand their eyes, and they squeak so when they're hunting."

"Oh! but that's so jolly, and their eyes are beautiful."

"They're always catching mice and little chickens; all sorts of little things."

"But they don't mean to; they only want them to eat. Don't you think things are jolliest at night?"

She slipped her arm in his.

"No; I don't like the dark."

"Why not? It's splendid – when things get mysterious." He dwelt lovingly on that word.

"I don't like mysterious things. They frighten you."

"Oh, Sylvia!"

"No, I like early morning – especially in spring, when it's beginning to get leafy."

"Well, of course."

She was leaning against him, for safety, just a little; and stretching out his arm, he took good hold of the branch to make a back for her. There was a silence. Then he said:

"If you could only have one tree, which would you have?"

"Not oaks. Limes – no – birches. Which would you?"

He pondered. There were so many trees that were perfect. Birches and limes, of course; but beeches and cypresses, and yews, and cedars, and holm-oaks – almost, and plane-trees; then he said suddenly:

"Pines; I mean the big ones with reddish stems and branches

pretty high up."

"Why?"

Again he pondered. It was very important to explain exactly why; his feelings about everything were concerned in this. And while he mused she gazed at him, as if surprised to see anyone think so deeply. At last he said:

"Because they're independent and dignified and never quite cold, and their branches seem to brood, but chiefly because the ones I mean are generally out of the common where you find them. You know – just one or two, strong and dark, standing out against the sky."

"They're TOO dark."

It occurred to him suddenly that he had forgotten larches. They, of course, could be heavenly, when you lay under them and looked up at the sky, as he had that afternoon out there. Then he heard her say:

"If I could only have one flower, I should have lilies of the valley, the small ones that grow wild and smell so jolly."

He had a swift vision of another flower, dark – very different, and was silent.

"What would you have, Mark?" Her voice sounded a little hurt. "You ARE thinking of one, aren't you?"

He said honestly:

"Yes, I am."

"Which?"

"It's dark, too; you wouldn't care for it a bit."

"How d'you know?"

"A clove carnation."

"But I do like it – only – not very much."

He nodded solemnly.

"I knew you wouldn't."

Then a silence fell between them. She had ceased to lean against him, and he missed the cosy friendliness of it. Now that their voices and the cawings of the rooks had ceased, there was nothing heard but the dry rustle of the leaves, and the plaintive cry of a buzzard hawk hunting over the little tor across the river. There were nearly always two up there, quartering the sky. To the boy it was lovely, that silence – like Nature talking to you – Nature always talked in silences. The beasts, the birds, the insects, only really showed themselves when you were still; you had to be awfully quiet, too, for flowers and plants, otherwise you couldn't see the real jolly separate life there was in them. Even the boulders down there, that old Godden thought had been washed up by the Flood, never showed you what queer shapes they had, and let you feel close to them, unless you were thinking of nothing else. Sylvia, after all, was better in that way than he had expected. She could keep quiet (he had thought girls hopeless); she was gentle, and it was rather jolly to watch her. Through the leaves there came the faint far tinkle of the tea-bell.

She said: "We must get down."

It was much too jolly to go in, really. But if she wanted her tea – girls always wanted tea! And, twisting the cord carefully

round the branch, he began to superintend her descent. About to follow, he heard her cry:

"Oh, Mark! I'm stuck – I'm stuck! I can't reach it with my foot! I'm swinging!" And he saw that she WAS swinging by her hands and the cord.

"Let go; drop on to the branch below – the cord'll hold you straight till you grab the trunk."

Her voice mounted piteously:

"I can't – I really can't – I should slip!"

He tied the cord, and slithered hastily to the branch below her; then, bracing himself against the trunk, he clutched her round the waist and knees; but the taut cord held her up, and she would not come to anchor. He could not hold her and untie the cord, which was fast round her waist. If he let her go with one hand, and got out his knife, he would never be able to cut and hold her at the same time. For a moment he thought he had better climb up again and slack off the cord, but he could see by her face that she was getting frightened; he could feel it by the quivering of her body.

"If I heave you up," he said, "can you get hold again above?" And, without waiting for an answer, he heaved. She caught hold frantically.

"Hold on just for a second."

She did not answer, but he saw that her face had gone very white. He snatched out his knife and cut the cord. She clung just for that moment, then came loose into his arms, and he hauled

her to him against the trunk. Safe there, she buried her face on his shoulder. He began to murmur to her and smooth her softly, with quite a feeling of its being his business to smooth her like this, to protect her. He knew she was crying, but she let no sound escape, and he was very careful not to show that he knew, for fear she should feel ashamed. He wondered if he ought to kiss her. At last he did, on the top of her head, very gently. Then she put up her face and said she was a beast. And he kissed her again on an eyebrow.

After that she seemed all right, and very gingerly they descended to the ground, where shadows were beginning to lengthen over the fern and the sun to slant into their eyes.

# XIII

The night after the wedding the boy stood at the window of his pleasant attic bedroom, with one wall sloping, and a faint smell of mice. He was tired and excited, and his brain, full of pictures. This was his first wedding, and he was haunted by a vision of his sister's little white form, and her face with its starry eyes. She was gone – his no more! How fearful the Wedding March had sounded on that organ – that awful old wheezer; and the sermon! One didn't want to hear that sort of thing when one felt inclined to cry. Even Gordy had looked rather boiled when he was giving her away. With perfect distinctness he could still see the group before the altar rails, just as if he had not been a part of it himself. Cis in her white, Sylvia in fluffy grey; his impassive brother-in-law's tall figure; Gordy looking queer in a black coat, with a very yellow face, and eyes still half-closed. The rotten part of it all had been that you wanted to be just FEELING, and you had to be thinking of the ring, and your gloves, and whether the lowest button of your white waistcoat was properly undone. Girls could do both, it seemed – Cis seemed to be seeing something wonderful all the time, and Sylvia had looked quite holy. He himself had been too conscious of the rector's voice, and the sort of professional manner with which he did it all, as if he were making up a prescription, with directions how to take it. And yet it was all rather beautiful in a kind of fashion,

every face turned one way, and a tremendous hush – except for poor old Godden's blowing of his nose with his enormous red handkerchief; and the soft darkness up in the roof, and down in the pews; and the sunlight brightening the South windows. All the same, it would have been much jollier just taking hands by themselves somewhere, and saying out before God what they really felt – because, after all, God was everything, everywhere, not only in stuffy churches. That was how HE would like to be married, out of doors on a starry night like this, when everything felt wonderful all round you. Surely God wasn't half as small as people seemed always making Him – a sort of superior man a little bigger than themselves! Even the very most beautiful and wonderful and awful things one could imagine or make, could only be just nothing to a God who had a temple like the night out there. But then you couldn't be married alone, and no girl would ever like to be married without rings and flowers and dresses, and words that made it all feel small and cosy! Cis might have, perhaps, only she wouldn't, because of not hurting other people's feelings; but Sylvia – never – she would be afraid. Only, of course, she was young! And the thread of his thoughts broke – and scattered like beads from a string.

Leaning out, and resting his chin on his hands, he drew the night air into his lungs. Honeysuckle, or was it the scent of lilies still? The stars all out, and lots of owls to-night – four at least. What would night be like without owls and stars? But that was it – you never could think what things would be like if they

weren't just what and where they were. You never knew what was coming, either; and yet, when it came, it seemed as if nothing else ever could have come. That was queer-you could do anything you liked until you'd done it, but when you HAD done it, then you knew, of course, that you must always have had to… What was that light, below and to the left? Whose room? Old Tingle's – no, the little spare room – Sylvia's! She must be awake, then! He leaned far out, and whispered in the voice she had said was still furry:

"Sylvia!"

The light flickered, he could just see her head appear, with hair all loose, and her face turning up to him. He could only half see, half imagine it, mysterious, blurry; and he whispered:

"Isn't this jolly?"

The whisper travelled back:

"Awfully."

"Aren't you sleepy?"

"No; are you?"

"Not a bit. D'you hear the owls?"

"Rather."

"Doesn't it smell good?"

"Perfect. Can you see me?"

"Only just, not too much. Can you?"

"I can't see your nose. Shall I get the candle?"

"No – that'd spoil it. What are you sitting on?"

"The window sill."

"It doesn't twist your neck, does it?"

"No – o – only a little bit."

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes."

"Wait half a shake. I'll let down some chocolate in my big bath towel; it'll swing along to you – reach out."

A dim white arm reached out.

"Catch! I say, you won't get cold?"

"Rather not."

"It's too jolly to sleep, isn't it?"

"Mark!"

"Yes."

"Which star is yours? Mine is the white one over the top branch of the big sycamore, from here."

"Mine is that twinkling red one over the summer house. Sylvia!"

"Yes."

"Catch!"

"Oh! I couldn't – what was it?"

"Nothing."

"No, but what WAS it?"

"Only my star. It's caught in your hair."

"Oh!"

"Listen!"

Silence, then, until her awed whisper:

"What?"

And his floating down, dying away:

"CAVE!"

What had stirred – some window opened? Cautiously he spied along the face of the dim house. There was no light anywhere, nor any shifting blur of white at her window below. All was dark, remote – still sweet with the scent of something jolly. And then he saw what that something was. All over the wall below his window white jessamine was in flower – stars, not only in the sky. Perhaps the sky was really a field of white flowers; and God walked there, and plucked the stars…

The next morning there was a letter on his plate when he came down to breakfast. He couldn't open it with Sylvia on one side of him, and old Tingle on the other. Then with a sort of anger he did open it. He need not have been afraid. It was written so that anyone might have read; it told of a climb, of bad weather, said they were coming home. Was he relieved, disturbed, pleased at their coming back, or only uneasily ashamed? She had not got his second letter yet. He could feel old Tingle looking round at him with those queer sharp twinkling eyes of hers, and Sylvia regarding him quite frankly. And conscious that he was growing red, he said to himself: 'I won't!' And did not. In three days they would be at Oxford. Would they come on here at once? Old Tingle was speaking. He heard Sylvia answer: "No, I don't like 'bopsies.' They're so hard!" It was their old name for high cheekbones. Sylvia certainly had none, her cheeks went softly up to her eyes.

"Do you, Mark?"

He said slowly:

"On some people."

"People who have them are strong-willed, aren't they?"

Was SHE – Anna – strong-willed? It came to him that he did not know at all what she was.

When breakfast was over and he had got away to his old greenhouse, he had a strange, unhappy time. He was a beast, he had not been thinking of her half enough! He took the letter out, and frowned at it horribly. Why could he not feel more? What was the matter with him? Why was he such a brute – not to be thinking of her day and night? For long he stood, disconsolate, in the little dark greenhouse among the images of his beasts, the letter in his hand.

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.