

ДЖЕК ЛОНДОН

WHEN GOD LAUGHS,
AND OTHER STORIES

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and Other Stories**

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When God Laughs, and Other Stories:

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Jack London

When God Laughs, and Other Stories

WHEN GOD LAUGHS (with compliments to Harry Cowell)

“The gods, the gods are stronger; time
Falls down before them, all men’s knees
Bow, all men’s prayers and sorrows climb
Like incense toward them; yea, for these
Are gods, Felise.”

Carquinez had relaxed finally. He stole a glance at the rattling windows, looked upward at the beamed roof, and listened for a moment to the savage roar of the south-easter as it caught the bungalow in its bellowing jaws. Then he held his glass between him and the fire and laughed for joy through the golden wine.

“It is beautiful,” he said. “It is sweetly sweet. It is a woman’s wine, and it was made for gray-robed saints to drink.”

“We grow it on our own warm hills,” I said, with pardonable California pride. “You rode up yesterday through the vines from

which it was made.”

It was worth while to get Carquinez to loosen up. Nor was he ever really himself until he felt the mellow warmth of the vine singing in his blood. He was an artist, it is true, always an artist; but somehow, sober, the high pitch and lilt went out of his thought-processes and he was prone to be as deadly dull as a British Sunday – not dull as other men are dull, but dull when measured by the sprightly wight that Monte Carquinez was when he was really himself.

From all this it must not be inferred that Carquinez, who is my dear friend and dearer comrade, was a sot. Far from it. He rarely erred. As I have said, he was an artist. He knew when he had enough, and enough, with him, was equilibrium – the equilibrium that is yours and mine when we are sober.

His was a wise and instinctive temperateness that savoured of the Greek. Yet he was far from Greek. “I am Aztec, I am Inca, I am Spaniard,” I have heard him say. And in truth he looked it, a compound of strange and ancient races, what with his swarthy skin and the asymmetry and primitiveness of his features. His eyes, under massively arched brows, were wide apart and black with the blackness that is barbaric, while before them was perpetually falling down a great black mop of hair through which he gazed like a roguish satyr from a thicket. He invariably wore a soft flannel shirt under his velvet-corduroy jacket, and his necktie was red. This latter stood for the red flag (he had once lived with the socialists of Paris), and it

symbolized the blood and brotherhood of man. Also, he had never been known to wear anything on his head save a leather-banded sombrero. It was even rumoured that he had been born with this particular piece of headgear. And in my experience it was provocative of nothing short of sheer delight to see that Mexican sombrero hailing a cab in Piccadilly or storm-tossed in the crush for the New York Elevated.

As I have said, Carquinez was made quick by wine – “as the clay was made quick when God breathed the breath of life into it,” was his way of saying it. I confess that he was blasphemously intimate with God; and I must add that there was no blasphemy in him. He was at all times honest, and, because he was compounded of paradoxes, greatly misunderstood by those who did not know him. He could be as elementally raw at times as a screaming savage; and at other times as delicate as a maid, as subtle as a Spaniard. And – well, was he not Aztec? Inca? Spaniard?

And now I must ask pardon for the space I have given him. (He is my friend, and I love him.) The house was shaking to the storm, as he drew closer to the fire and laughed at it through his wine. He looked at me, and by the added lustre of his eye, and by the alertness of it, I knew that at last he was pitched in his proper key.

“And so you think you’ve won out against the gods?” he demanded.

“Why the gods?”

“Whose will but theirs has put satiety upon man?” he cried.

“And whence the will in me to escape satiety?” I asked triumphantly.

“Again the gods,” he laughed. “It is their game we play. They deal and shuffle all the cards... and take the stakes. Think not that you have escaped by fleeing from the mad cities. You with your vine-clad hills, your sunsets and your sunrises, your homely fare and simple round of living!

“I’ve watched you ever since I came. You have not won. You have surrendered. You have made terms with the enemy. You have made confession that you are tired. You have flown the white flag of fatigue. You have nailed up a notice to the effect that life is ebbing down in you. You have run away from life. You have played a trick, shabby trick. You have balked at the game. You refuse to play. You have thrown your cards under the table and run away to hide, here amongst your hills.”

He tossed his straight hair back from his flashing eyes, and scarcely interrupted to roll a long, brown, Mexican cigarette.

“But the gods know. It is an old trick. All the generations of man have tried it... and lost. The gods know how to deal with such as you. To pursue is to possess, and to possess is to be sated. And so you, in your wisdom, have refused any longer to pursue. You have elected surcease. Very well. You will become sated with surcease. You say you have escaped satiety! You have merely bartered it for senility. And senility is another name for satiety. It is satiety’s masquerade. Bah!”

“But look at me!” I cried.

Carquinez was ever a demon for haling ones soul out and making rags and tatters of it.

He looked me witheringly up and down.

“You see no signs,” I challenged.

“Decay is insidious,” he retorted. “You are rotten ripe.”

I laughed and forgave him for his very deviltry. But he refused to be forgiven.

“Do I not know?” he asked. “The gods always win. I have watched men play for years what seemed a winning game. In the end they lost.”

“Don’t you ever make mistakes?” I asked.

He blew many meditative rings of smoke before replying.

“Yes, I was nearly fooled, once. Let me tell you. There was Marvin Fiske. You remember him? And his Dantesque face and poet’s soul, singing his chant of the flesh, the very priest of Love? And there was Ethel Baird, whom also you must remember.”

“A warm saint,” I said.

“That is she! Holy as Love, and sweeter! Just a woman, made for love; and yet – how shall I say? – drenched through with holiness as your own air here is with the perfume of flowers. Well, they married. They played a hand with the gods – ”

“And they won, they gloriously won!” I broke in.

Carquinez looked at me pityingly, and his voice was like a funeral bell.

“They lost. They supremely, colossally lost.”

“But the world believes otherwise,” I ventured coldly.

“The world conjectures. The world sees only the face of things. But I know. Has it ever entered your mind to wonder why she took the veil, buried herself in that dolorous convent of the living dead?”

“Because she loved him so, and when he died...”

Speech was frozen on my lips by Carquinez’s sneer.

“A pat answer,” he said, “machine-made like a piece of cotton-drill. The world’s judgment! And much the world knows about it. Like you, she fled from life. She was beaten. She flung out the white flag of fatigue. And no beleaguered city ever flew that flag in such bitterness and tears.

“Now I shall tell you the whole tale, and you must believe me, for I know. They had pondered the problem of satiety. They loved Love. They knew to the uttermost farthing the value of Love. They loved him so well that they were fain to keep him always, warm and a-thrill in their hearts. They welcomed his coming; they feared to have him depart.

“Love was desire, they held, a delicious pain. He was ever seeking easement, and when he found that for which he sought, he died. Love denied was Love alive; Love granted was Love deceased. Do you follow me? They saw it was not the way of life to be hungry for what it has. To eat and still be hungry – man has never accomplished that feat. The problem of satiety. That is it. To have and to keep the sharp famine-edge of appetite at the groaning board. This was their problem, for they loved

Love. Often did they discuss it, with all Love's sweet ardours brimming in their eyes; his ruddy blood spraying their cheeks; his voice playing in and out with their voices, now hiding as a tremolo in their throats, and again shading a tone with that ineffable tenderness which he alone can utter.

“How do I know all this? I saw – much. More I learned from her diary. This I found in it, from Fiona Macleod: ‘For, truly, that wandering voice, that twilight-whisper, that breath so dewy-sweet, that flame-winged lute-player whom none sees but for a moment, in a rainbow-shimmer of joy, or a sudden lightning-flare of passion, this exquisite mystery we call Amor, comes, to some rapt visionaries at least, not with a song upon the lips that all may hear, or with blithe viol of public music, but as one wrought by ecstasy, dumbly eloquent with desire.’

“How to keep the flame-winged lute-player with his dumb eloquence of desire? To feast him was to lose him. Their love for each other was a great love. Their granaries were overflowing with plenitude; yet they wanted to keep the sharp famine-edge of their love undulled.

“Nor were they lean little fledglings theorizing on the threshold of Love. They were robust and realized souls. They had loved before, with others, in the days before they met; and in those days they had throttled Love with caresses, and killed him with kisses, and buried him in the pit of satiety.

“They were not cold wraiths, this man and woman. They were warm human. They had no Saxon soberness in their

blood. The colour of it was sunset-red. They glowed with it. Temperamentally theirs was the French joy in the flesh. They were idealists, but their idealism was Gallic. It was not tempered by the chill and sombre fluid that for the English serves as blood. There was no stoicism about them. They were Americans, descended out of the English, and yet the refraining and self-denying of the English spirit-groping were not theirs.

“They were all this that I have said, and they were made for joy, only they achieved a concept. A curse on concepts! They played with logic, and this was their logic. – But first let me tell you of a talk we had one night. It was of Gautier’s Madeline de Maupin. You remember the maid? She kissed once, and once only, and kisses she would have no more. Not that she found kisses were not sweet, but that she feared with repetition they would cloy. Satiety again! She tried to play without stakes against the gods. Now this is contrary to a rule of the game the gods themselves have made. Only the rules are not posted over the table. Mortals must play in order to learn the rules.

“Well, to the logic. The man and the woman argued thus: Why kiss once only? If to kiss once were wise, was it not wiser to kiss not at all? Thus could they keep Love alive. Fasting, he would knock forever at their hearts.

“Perhaps it was out of their heredity that they achieved this unholy concept. The breed will out and sometimes most fantastically. Thus in them did cursed Albion array herself a scheming wanton, a bold, cold-calculating, and artful hussy.

After all, I do not know. But this I know: it was out of their inordinate desire for joy that they forewent joy.

“As he said (I read it long afterward in one of his letters to her): ‘To hold you in my arms, close, and yet not close. To yearn for you, and never to have you, and so always to have you.’ And she: ‘For you to be always just beyond my reach. To be ever attaining you, and yet never attaining you, and for this to last forever, always fresh and new, and always with the first flush upon us.

“That is not the way they said it. On my lips their love-philosophy is mangled. And who am I to delve into their soul-stuff? I am a frog, on the dank edge of a great darkness, gazing goggle-eyed at the mystery and wonder of their flaming souls.

“And they were right, as far as they went. Everything is good... as long as it is unpossessed. Satiety and possession are Death’s horses; they run in span.

““And time could only tutor us to eke
Our rapture’s warmth with custom’s afterglow.’

“They got that from a sonnet of Alfred Austin’s. It was called ‘Love’s Wisdom.’ It was the one kiss of Madeline de Maupin. How did it run?

““Kiss we and part; no further can we go;
And better death than we from high to low
Should dwindle, or decline from strong to weak.’

“But they were wiser. They would not kiss and part. They would not kiss at all, and thus they planned to stay at Love’s topmost peak. They married. You were in England at the time. And never was there such a marriage. They kept their secret to themselves. I did not know, then. Their rapture’s warmth did not cool. Their love burned with increasing brightness. Never was there anything like it. The time passed, the months, the years, and ever the flame-winged lute-player grew more resplendent.

“Everybody marvelled. They became the wonderful lovers, and they were greatly envied. Sometimes women pitied her because she was childless; it is the form the envy of such creatures takes.

“And I did not know their secret. I pondered and I marvelled. As first I had expected, subconsciously I imagine, the passing of their love. Then I became aware that it was Time that passed and Love that remained. Then I became curious. What was their secret? What were the magic fetters with which they bound Love to them? How did they hold the graceless elf? What elixir of eternal love had they drunk together as had Tristram and Iseult of old time? And whose hand had brewed the fairy drink?

“As I say, I was curious, and I watched them. They were love-mad. They lived in an unending revel of Love. They made a pomp and ceremonial of it. They saturated themselves in the art and poetry of Love. No, they were not neurotics. They were sane and healthy, and they were artists. But they had accomplished the

impossible. They had achieved deathless desire.

“And I? I saw much of them and their everlasting miracle of Love. I puzzled and wondered, and then one day – ”

Carquinez broke off abruptly and asked, “Have you ever read, ‘Love’s Waiting Time’?”

I shook my head.

“Page wrote it – Curtis Hidden Page, I think. Well, it was that bit of verse that gave me the clue. One day, in the window-seat near the big piano – you remember how she could play? She used to laugh, sometimes, and doubt whether it was for them I came, or for the music. She called me a ‘music-sot’ once, a ‘sound-debauchee.’ What a voice he had! When he sang I believed in immortality, my regard for the gods grew almost patronizing and I devised ways and means whereby I surely could outwit them and their tricks.

“It was a spectacle for God, that man and woman, years married, and singing love-songs with a freshness virginal as new-born Love himself, with a ripeness and wealth of ardour that young lovers can never know. Young lovers were pale and anaemic beside that long-married pair. To see them, all fire and flame and tenderness, at a trembling distance, lavishing caresses of eye and voice with every action, through every silence – their love driving them toward each other, and they withholding like fluttering moths, each to the other a candle-flame, and revolving each about the other in the mad gyrations of an amazing orbit-flight! It seemed, in obedience to some great law of physics,

more potent than gravitation and more subtle, that they must corporeally melt each into each there before my very eyes. Small wonder they were called the wonderful lovers.

“I have wandered. Now to the clue. One day in the window-seat I found a book of verse. It opened of itself, betraying long habit, to ‘Love’s Waiting Time.’ The page was thumbed and limp with overhandling, and there I read: —

“So sweet it is to stand but just apart,
To know each other better, and to keep
The soft, delicious sense of two that touch...

O love, not yet!.. Sweet, let us keep our love
Wrapped round with sacred mystery awhile,
Waiting the secret of the coming years,
That come not yet, not yet... sometime...
not yet...

Oh, yet a little while our love may grow!
When it has blossomed it will haply die.
Feed it with lipless kisses, let it sleep,
Bedded in dead denial yet some while...
Oh, yet a little while, a little while.’

“I folded the book on my thumb and sat there silent and without moving for a long time. I was stunned by the clearness of vision the verse had imparted to me. It was illumination. It was like a bolt of God’s lightning in the Pit. They would keep Love,

the fickle sprite, the forerunner of young life – young life that is imperative to be born!

“I conned the lines over in my mind – ‘Not yet, sometime’ – ‘O Love, not yet’ – ‘Feed it with lipless kisses, let it sleep.’ And I laughed aloud, ha, ha! I saw with white vision their blameless souls. They were children. They did not understand. They played with Nature’s fire and bedded with a naked sword. They laughed at the gods. They would stop the cosmic sap. They had invented a system, and brought it to the gaming-table of life, and expected to win out. ‘Beware!’ I cried. ‘The gods are behind the table. They make new rules for every system that is devised. You have no chance to win.’

“But I did not so cry to them. I waited. They would learn that their system was worthless and throw it away. They would be content with whatever happiness the gods gave them and not strive to wrest more away.

“I watched. I said nothing. The months continued to come and go, and still the famine-edge of their love grew the sharper. Never did they dull it with a permitted love-clasp. They ground and whetted it on self-denial, and sharper and sharper it grew. This went on until even I doubted. Did the gods sleep? I wondered. Or were they dead? I laughed to myself. The man and the woman had made a miracle. They had outwitted God. They had shamed the flesh, and blackened the face of the good Earth Mother. They had played with her fire and not been burned. They were immune. They were themselves gods, knowing good from evil

and tasting not. ‘Was this the way gods came to be?’ I asked myself. ‘I am a frog,’ I said. ‘But for my mud-lidded eyes I should have been blinded by the brightness of this wonder I have witnessed. I have puffed myself up with my wisdom and passed judgment upon gods.’

“Yet even in this, my latest wisdom, I was wrong. They were not gods. They were man and woman – soft clay that sighed and thrilled, shot through with desire, thumbed with strange weaknesses which the gods have not.”

Carquinez broke from his narrative to roll another cigarette and to laugh harshly. It was not a pretty laugh; it was like the mockery of a devil, and it rose over and rode the roar of the storm that came muffled to our ears from the crashing outside world.

“I am a frog,” he said apologetically. “How were they to understand? They were artists, not biologists. They knew the clay of the studio, but they did not know the clay of which they themselves were made. But this I will say – they played high. Never was there such a game before, and I doubt me if there will ever be such a game again.

“Never was lovers’ ecstasy like theirs. They had not killed Love with kisses. They had quickened him with denial. And by denial they drove him on till he was all aburst with desire. And the flame-winged lute-player fanned them with his warm wings till they were all but swooning. It was the very delirium of Love, and it continued undiminished and increasing through the weeks and months.

“They longed and yearned, with all the fond pangs and sweet delicious agonies, with an intensity never felt by lovers before nor since.

“And then one day the drowsy gods ceased nodding. They aroused and looked at the man and woman who had made a mock of them. And the man and woman looked into each other’s eyes one morning and knew that something was gone. It was the flame-winged one. He had fled, silently, in the night, from their anchorites’ board.

“They looked into each other’s eyes and knew that they did not care. Desire was dead. Do you understand? Desire was dead. And they had never kissed. Not once had they kissed. Love was gone. They would never yearn and burn again. For them there was nothing left – no more tremblings and flutterings and delicious anguishes, no more throbbing and pulsing, and sighing and song. Desire was dead. It had died in the night, on a couch cold and unattended; nor had they witnessed its passing. They learned it for the first time in each other’s eyes.

“The gods may not be kind, but they are often merciful. They had twirled the little ivory ball and swept the stakes from the table. All that remained was the man and woman gazing into each other’s cold eyes. And then he died. That was the mercy. Within the week Marvin Fiske was dead – you remember the accident. And in her diary, written at this time, I long afterward read Mitchell Kennerly’s: —

“There was not a single hour
We might have kissed and did not kiss.”

“Oh, the irony of it!” I cried out.

And Carquinez, in the firelight a veritable Mephistopheles in velvet jacket, fixed me with his black eyes.

“And they won, you said? The world’s judgment! I have told you, and I know. They won as you are winning, here in your hills.”

“But you,” I demanded hotly; “you with your orgies of sound and sense, with your mad cities and madder frolics – bethink you that you win?”

He shook his head slowly. “Because you with your sober bucolic regime, lose, is no reason that I should win. We never win. Sometimes we think we win. That is a little pleasantry of the gods.”

THE APOSTATE

“Now I wake me up to work;
I pray the Lord I may not shirk.
If I should die before the night,
I pray the Lord my work’s all right.
Amen.”

“If you don’t git up, Johnny, I won’t give you a bite to eat!”

The threat had no effect on the boy. He clung stubbornly to sleep, fighting for its oblivion as the dreamer fights for his dream. The boy’s hands loosely clenched themselves, and he made feeble, spasmodic blows at the air. These blows were intended for his mother, but she betrayed practised familiarity in avoiding them as she shook him roughly by the shoulder.

“Lemme ‘lone!”

It was a cry that began, muffled, in the deeps of sleep, that swiftly rushed upward, like a wail, into passionate belligerence, and that died away and sank down into an inarticulate whine. It was a bestial cry, as of a soul in torment, filled with infinite protest and pain.

But she did not mind. She was a sad-eyed, tired-faced woman, and she had grown used to this task, which she repeated every day of her life. She got a grip on the bedclothes and tried to strip

them down; but the boy, ceasing his punching, clung to them desperately. In a huddle, at the foot of the bed, he still remained covered. Then she tried dragging the bedding to the floor. The boy opposed her. She braced herself. Hers was the superior weight, and the boy and bedding gave, the former instinctively following the latter in order to shelter against the chill of the room that bit into his body.

As he toppled on the edge of the bed it seemed that he must fall head-first to the floor. But consciousness fluttered up in him. He righted himself and for a moment perilously balanced. Then he struck the floor on his feet. On the instant his mother seized him by the shoulders and shook him. Again his fists struck out, this time with more force and directness. At the same time his eyes opened. She released him. He was awake.

“All right,” he mumbled.

She caught up the lamp and hurried out, leaving him in darkness.

“You’ll be docked,” she warned back to him.

He did not mind the darkness. When he had got into his clothes, he went out into the kitchen. His tread was very heavy for so thin and light a boy. His legs dragged with their own weight, which seemed unreasonable because they were such skinny legs. He drew a broken-bottomed chair to the table.

“Johnny,” his mother called sharply.

He arose as sharply from the chair, and, without a word, went to the sink. It was a greasy, filthy sink. A smell came up from the

outlet. He took no notice of it. That a sink should smell was to him part of the natural order, just as it was a part of the natural order that the soap should be grimy with dish-water and hard to lather. Nor did he try very hard to make it lather. Several splashes of the cold water from the running faucet completed the function. He did not wash his teeth. For that matter he had never seen a toothbrush, nor did he know that there existed beings in the world who were guilty of so great a foolishness as tooth washing.

“You might wash yourself wunst a day without bein’ told,” his mother complained.

She was holding a broken lid on the pot as she poured two cups of coffee. He made no remark, for this was a standing quarrel between them, and the one thing upon which his mother was hard as adamant. “Wunst” a day it was compulsory that he should wash his face. He dried himself on a greasy towel, damp and dirty and ragged, that left his face covered with shreds of lint.

“I wish we didn’t live so far away,” she said, as he sat down. “I try to do the best I can. You know that. But a dollar on the rent is such a savin’, an’ we’ve more room here. You know that.”

He scarcely followed her. He had heard it all before, many times. The range of her thought was limited, and she was ever harking back to the hardship worked upon them by living so far from the mills.

“A dollar means more grub,” he remarked sententiously. “I’d sooner do the walkin’ an’ git the grub.”

He ate hurriedly, half chewing the bread and washing the

unmasticated chunks down with coffee. The hot and muddy liquid went by the name of coffee. Johnny thought it was coffee – and excellent coffee. That was one of the few of life’s illusions that remained to him. He had never drunk real coffee in his life.

In addition to the bread, there was a small piece of cold pork. His mother refilled his cup with coffee. As he was finishing the bread, he began to watch if more was forthcoming. She intercepted his questioning glance.

“Now, don’t be hoggish, Johnny,” was her comment. “You’ve had your share. Your brothers an’ sisters are smaller’n you.”

He did not answer the rebuke. He was not much of a talker. Also, he ceased his hungry glancing for more. He was uncomplaining, with a patience that was as terrible as the school in which it had been learned. He finished his coffee, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, and started to rise.

“Wait a second,” she said hastily. “I guess the loaf kin stand you another slice – a thin un.”

There was legerdemain in her actions. With all the seeming of cutting a slice from the loaf for him, she put loaf and slice back in the bread box and conveyed to him one of her own two slices. She believed she had deceived him, but he had noted her sleight-of-hand. Nevertheless, he took the bread shamelessly. He had a philosophy that his mother, because of her chronic sickliness, was not much of an eater anyway.

She saw that he was chewing the bread dry, and reached over and emptied her coffee cup into his.

“Don’t set good somehow on my stomach this morning,” she explained.

A distant whistle, prolonged and shrieking, brought both of them to their feet. She glanced at the tin alarm-clock on the shelf. The hands stood at half-past five. The rest of the factory world was just arousing from sleep. She drew a shawl about her shoulders, and on her head put a dingy hat, shapeless and ancient.

“We’ve got to run,” she said, turning the wick of the lamp and blowing down the chimney.

They groped their way out and down the stairs. It was clear and cold, and Johnny shivered at the first contact with the outside air. The stars had not yet begun to pale in the sky, and the city lay in blackness. Both Johnny and his mother shuffled their feet as they walked. There was no ambition in the leg muscles to swing the feet clear of the ground.

After fifteen silent minutes, his mother turned off to the right. “Don’t be late,” was her final warning from out of the dark that was swallowing her up.

He made no response, steadily keeping on his way. In the factory quarter, doors were opening everywhere, and he was soon one of a multitude that pressed onward through the dark. As he entered the factory gate the whistle blew again. He glanced at the east. Across a ragged sky-line of housetops a pale light was beginning to creep. This much he saw of the day as he turned his back upon it and joined his work gang.

He took his place in one of many long rows of machines.

Before him, above a bin filled with small bobbins, were large bobbins revolving rapidly. Upon these he wound the jute-twine of the small bobbins. The work was simple. All that was required was celerity. The small bobbins were emptied so rapidly, and there were so many large bobbins that did the emptying, that there were no idle moments.

He worked mechanically. When a small bobbin ran out, he used his left hand for a brake, stopping the large bobbin and at the same time, with thumb and forefinger, catching the flying end of twine. Also, at the same time, with his right hand, he caught up the loose twine-end of a small bobbin. These various acts with both hands were performed simultaneously and swiftly. Then there would come a flash of his hands as he looped the weaver's knot and released the bobbin. There was nothing difficult about weaver's knots. He once boasted he could tie them in his sleep. And for that matter, he sometimes did, toiling centuries long in a single night at tying an endless succession of weaver's knots.

Some of the boys shirked, wasting time and machinery by not replacing the small bobbins when they ran out. And there was an overseer to prevent this. He caught Johnny's neighbour at the trick, and boxed his ears.

"Look at Johnny there – why ain't you like him?" the overseer wrathfully demanded.

Johnny's bobbins were running full blast, but he did not thrill at the indirect praise. There had been a time... but that was long ago, very long ago. His apathetic face was expressionless as he

listened to himself being held up as a shining example. He was the perfect worker. He knew that. He had been told so, often. It was a commonplace, and besides it didn't seem to mean anything to him any more. From the perfect worker he had evolved into the perfect machine. When his work went wrong, it was with him as with the machine, due to faulty material. It would have been as possible for a perfect nail-die to cut imperfect nails as for him to make a mistake.

And small wonder. There had never been a time when he had not been in intimate relationship with machines. Machinery had almost been bred into him, and at any rate he had been brought up on it. Twelve years before, there had been a small flutter of excitement in the loom room of this very mill. Johnny's mother had fainted. They stretched her out on the floor in the midst of the shrieking machines. A couple of elderly women were called from their looms. The foreman assisted. And in a few minutes there was one more soul in the loom room than had entered by the doors. It was Johnny, born with the pounding, crashing roar of the looms in his ears, drawing with his first breath the warm, moist air that was thick with flying lint. He had coughed that first day in order to rid his lungs of the lint; and for the same reason he had coughed ever since.

The boy alongside of Johnny whimpered and sniffed. The boy's face was convulsed with hatred for the overseer who kept a threatening eye on him from a distance; but every bobbin was running full. The boy yelled terrible oaths into the whirling

bobbins before him; but the sound did not carry half a dozen feet, the roaring of the room holding it in and containing it like a wall.

Of all this Johnny took no notice. He had a way of accepting things. Besides, things grow monotonous by repetition, and this particular happening he had witnessed many times. It seemed to him as useless to oppose the overseer as to defy the will of a machine. Machines were made to go in certain ways and to perform certain tasks. It was the same with the overseer.

But at eleven o'clock there was excitement in the room. In an apparently occult way the excitement instantly permeated everywhere. The one-legged boy who worked on the other side of Johnny bobbed swiftly across the floor to a bin truck that stood empty. Into this he dived out of sight, crutch and all. The superintendent of the mill was coming along, accompanied by a young man. He was well dressed and wore a starched shirt – a gentleman, in Johnny's classification of men, and also, "the Inspector."

He looked sharply at the boys as he passed along. Sometimes he stopped and asked questions. When he did so, he was compelled to shout at the top of his lungs, at which moments his face was ludicrously contorted with the strain of making himself heard. His quick eye noted the empty machine alongside of Johnny's, but he said nothing. Johnny also caught his eye, and he stopped abruptly. He caught Johnny by the arm to draw him back a step from the machine; but with an exclamation of surprise he released the arm.

“Pretty skinny,” the superintendent laughed anxiously.

“Pipe stems,” was the answer. “Look at those legs. The boy’s got the rickets – incipient, but he’s got them. If epilepsy doesn’t get him in the end, it will be because tuberculosis gets him first.”

Johnny listened, but did not understand. Furthermore he was not interested in future ills. There was an immediate and more serious ill that threatened him in the form of the inspector.

“Now, my boy, I want you to tell me the truth,” the inspector said, or shouted, bending close to the boy’s ear to make him hear. “How old are you?”

“Fourteen,” Johnny lied, and he lied with the full force of his lungs. So loudly did he lie that it started him off in a dry, hacking cough that lifted the lint which had been settling in his lungs all morning.

“Looks sixteen at least,” said the superintendent.

“Or sixty,” snapped the inspector.

“He’s always looked that way.”

“How long?” asked the inspector, quickly.

“For years. Never gets a bit older.”

“Or younger, I dare say. I suppose he’s worked here all those years?”

“Off and on – but that was before the new law was passed,” the superintendent hastened to add.

“Machine idle?” the inspector asked, pointing at the unoccupied machine beside Johnny’s, in which the part-filled bobbins were flying like mad.

“Looks that way.” The superintendent motioned the overseer to him and shouted in his ear and pointed at the machine. “Machine’s idle,” he reported back to the inspector.

They passed on, and Johnny returned to his work, relieved in that the ill had been averted. But the one-legged boy was not so fortunate. The sharp-eyed inspector haled him out at arms length from the bin truck. His lips were quivering, and his face had all the expression of one upon whom was fallen profound and irremediable disaster. The overseer looked astounded, as though for the first time he had laid eyes on the boy, while the superintendent’s face expressed shock and displeasure.

“I know him,” the inspector said. “He’s twelve years old. I’ve had him discharged from three factories inside the year. This makes the fourth.”

He turned to the one-legged boy. “You promised me, word and honour, that you’d go to school.”

The one-legged boy burst into tears. “Please, Mr. Inspector, two babies died on us, and we’re awful poor.”

“What makes you cough that way?” the inspector demanded, as though charging him with crime.

And as in denial of guilt, the one-legged boy replied: “It ain’t nothin’. I jes’ caught a cold last week, Mr. Inspector, that’s all.”

In the end the one-legged boy went out of the room with the inspector, the latter accompanied by the anxious and protesting superintendent. After that monotony settled down again. The long morning and the longer afternoon wore away and the whistle

blew for quitting time. Darkness had already fallen when Johnny passed out through the factory gate. In the interval the sun had made a golden ladder of the sky, flooded the world with its gracious warmth, and dropped down and disappeared in the west behind a ragged sky-line of housetops.

Supper was the family meal of the day – the one meal at which Johnny encountered his younger brothers and sisters. It partook of the nature of an encounter, to him, for he was very old, while they were distressingly young. He had no patience with their excessive and amazing juvenility. He did not understand it. His own childhood was too far behind him. He was like an old and irritable man, annoyed by the turbulence of their young spirits that was to him arrant silliness. He glowered silently over his food, finding compensation in the thought that they would soon have to go to work. That would take the edge off of them and make them sedate and dignified – like him. Thus it was, after the fashion of the human, that Johnny made of himself a yardstick with which to measure the universe.

During the meal, his mother explained in various ways and with infinite repetition that she was trying to do the best she could; so that it was with relief, the scant meal ended, that Johnny shoved back his chair and arose. He debated for a moment between bed and the front door, and finally went out the latter. He did not go far. He sat down on the stoop, his knees drawn up and his narrow shoulders drooping forward, his elbows on his knees and the palms of his hands supporting his chin.

As he sat there, he did no thinking. He was just resting. So far as his mind was concerned, it was asleep. His brothers and sisters came out, and with other children played noisily about him. An electric globe at the corner lighted their frolics. He was peevish and irritable, that they knew; but the spirit of adventure lured them into teasing him. They joined hands before him, and, keeping time with their bodies, chanted in his face weird and uncomplimentary doggerel. At first he snarled curses at them – curses he had learned from the lips of various foremen. Finding this futile, and remembering his dignity, he relapsed into dogged silence.

His brother Will, next to him in age, having just passed his tenth birthday, was the ringleader. Johnny did not possess particularly kindly feelings toward him. His life had early been embittered by continual giving over and giving way to Will. He had a definite feeling that Will was greatly in his debt and was ungrateful about it. In his own playtime, far back in the dim past, he had been robbed of a large part of that playtime by being compelled to take care of Will. Will was a baby then, and then, as now, their mother had spent her days in the mills. To Johnny had fallen the part of little father and little mother as well.

Will seemed to show the benefit of the giving over and the giving way. He was well-built, fairly rugged, as tall as his elder brother and even heavier. It was as though the life-blood of the one had been diverted into the other's veins. And in spirits it was the same. Johnny was jaded, worn out, without resilience,

while his younger brother seemed bursting and spilling over with exuberance.

The mocking chant rose louder and louder. Will leaned closer as he danced, thrusting out his tongue. Johnny's left arm shot out and caught the other around the neck. At the same time he rapped his bony fist to the other's nose. It was a pathetically bony fist, but that it was sharp to hurt was evidenced by the squeal of pain it produced. The other children were uttering frightened cries, while Johnny's sister, Jennie, had dashed into the house.

He thrust Will from him, kicked him savagely on the shins, then reached for him and slammed him face downward in the dirt. Nor did he release him till the face had been rubbed into the dirt several times. Then the mother arrived, an anaemic whirlwind of solicitude and maternal wrath.

"Why can't he leave me alone?" was Johnny's reply to her upbraiding. "Can't he see I'm tired?"

"I'm as big as you," Will raged in her arms, his face a mass of tears, dirt, and blood. "I'm as big as you now, an' I'm goin' to git bigger. Then I'll lick you – see if I don't."

"You ought to be to work, seein' how big you are," Johnny snarled. "That's what's the matter with you. You ought to be to work. An' it's up to your ma to put you to work."

"But he's too young," she protested. "He's only a little boy."

"I was younger'n him when I started to work."

Johnny's mouth was open, further to express the sense of unfairness that he felt, but the mouth closed with a snap. He

turned gloomily on his heel and stalked into the house and to bed. The door of his room was open to let in warmth from the kitchen. As he undressed in the semi-darkness he could hear his mother talking with a neighbour woman who had dropped in. His mother was crying, and her speech was punctuated with spiritless snuffles.

“I can’t make out what’s gittin’ into Johnny,” he could hear her say. “He didn’t used to be this way. He was a patient little angel.

“An’ he is a good boy,” she hastened to defend. “He’s worked faithful, an’ he did go to work too young. But it wasn’t my fault. I do the best I can, I’m sure.”

Prolonged sniffing from the kitchen, and Johnny murmured to himself as his eyelids closed down, “You betcher life I’ve worked faithful.”

The next morning he was torn bodily by his mother from the grip of sleep. Then came the meagre breakfast, the tramp through the dark, and the pale glimpse of day across the housetops as he turned his back on it and went in through the factory gate. It was another day, of all the days, and all the days were alike.

And yet there had been variety in his life – at the times he changed from one job to another, or was taken sick. When he was six, he was little mother and father to Will and the other children still younger. At seven he went into the mills – winding bobbins. When he was eight, he got work in another mill. His new job was marvellously easy. All he had to do was to sit down with a little stick in his hand and guide a stream of cloth that

flowed past him. This stream of cloth came out of the maw of a machine, passed over a hot roller, and went on its way elsewhere. But he sat always in one place, beyond the reach of daylight, a gas-jet flaring over him, himself part of the mechanism.

He was very happy at that job, in spite of the moist heat, for he was still young and in possession of dreams and illusions. And wonderful dreams he dreamed as he watched the steaming cloth streaming endlessly by. But there was no exercise about the work, no call upon his mind, and he dreamed less and less, while his mind grew torpid and drowsy. Nevertheless, he earned two dollars a week, and two dollars represented the difference between acute starvation and chronic underfeeding.

But when he was nine, he lost his job. Measles was the cause of it. After he recovered, he got work in a glass factory. The pay was better, and the work demanded skill. It was piecework, and the more skilful he was, the bigger wages he earned. Here was incentive. And under this incentive he developed into a remarkable worker.

It was simple work, the tying of glass stoppers into small bottles. At his waist he carried a bundle of twine. He held the bottles between his knees so that he might work with both hands. Thus, in a sitting position and bending over his own knees, his narrow shoulders grew humped and his chest was contracted for ten hours each day. This was not good for the lungs, but he tied three hundred dozen bottles a day.

The superintendent was very proud of him, and brought

visitors to look at him. In ten hours three hundred dozen bottles passed through his hands. This meant that he had attained machine-like perfection. All waste movements were eliminated. Every motion of his thin arms, every movement of a muscle in the thin fingers, was swift and accurate. He worked at high tension, and the result was that he grew nervous. At night his muscles twitched in his sleep, and in the daytime he could not relax and rest. He remained keyed up and his muscles continued to twitch. Also he grew sallow and his lint-cough grew worse. Then pneumonia laid hold of the feeble lungs within the contracted chest, and he lost his job in the glass-works.

Now he had returned to the jute mills where he had first begun with winding bobbins. But promotion was waiting for him. He was a good worker. He would next go on the starcher, and later he would go into the loom room. There was nothing after that except increased efficiency.

The machinery ran faster than when he had first gone to work, and his mind ran slower. He no longer dreamed at all, though his earlier years had been full of dreaming. Once he had been in love. It was when he first began guiding the cloth over the hot roller, and it was with the daughter of the superintendent. She was much older than he, a young woman, and he had seen her at a distance only a paltry half-dozen times. But that made no difference. On the surface of the cloth stream that poured past him, he pictured radiant futures wherein he performed prodigies of toil, invented miraculous machines, won to the mastership of the mills, and in

the end took her in his arms and kissed her soberly on the brow.

But that was all in the long ago, before he had grown too old and tired to love. Also, she had married and gone away, and his mind had gone to sleep. Yet it had been a wonderful experience, and he used often to look back upon it as other men and women look back upon the time they believed in fairies. He had never believed in fairies nor Santa Claus; but he had believed implicitly in the smiling future his imagination had wrought into the steaming cloth stream.

He had become a man very early in life. At seven, when he drew his first wages, began his adolescence. A certain feeling of independence crept up in him, and the relationship between him and his mother changed. Somehow, as an earner and breadwinner, doing his own work in the world, he was more like an equal with her. Manhood, full-blown manhood, had come when he was eleven, at which time he had gone to work on the night shift for six months. No child works on the night shift and remains a child.

There had been several great events in his life. One of these had been when his mother bought some California prunes. Two others had been the two times when she cooked custard. Those had been events. He remembered them kindly. And at that time his mother had told him of a blissful dish she would sometime make – “floating island,” she had called it, “better than custard.” For years he had looked forward to the day when he would sit down to the table with floating island before him, until at last he

had relegated the idea of it to the limbo of unattainable ideals.

Once he found a silver quarter lying on the sidewalk. That, also, was a great event in his life, withal a tragic one. He knew his duty on the instant the silver flashed on his eyes, before even he had picked it up. At home, as usual, there was not enough to eat, and home he should have taken it as he did his wages every Saturday night. Right conduct in this case was obvious; but he never had any spending of his money, and he was suffering from candy hunger. He was ravenous for the sweets that only on red-letter days he had ever tasted in his life.

He did not attempt to deceive himself. He knew it was sin, and deliberately he sinned when he went on a fifteen-cent candy debauch. Ten cents he saved for a future orgy; but not being accustomed to the carrying of money, he lost the ten cents. This occurred at the time when he was suffering all the torments of conscience, and it was to him an act of divine retribution. He had a frightened sense of the closeness of an awful and wrathful God. God had seen, and God had been swift to punish, denying him even the full wages of sin.

In memory he always looked back upon that as the one great criminal deed of his life, and at the recollection his conscience always awoke and gave him another twinge. It was the one skeleton in his closet. Also, being so made, and circumstanced, he looked back upon the deed with regret. He was dissatisfied with the manner in which he had spent the quarter. He could have invested it better, and, out of his later knowledge of the

quickness of God, he would have beaten God out by spending the whole quarter at one fell swoop. In retrospect he spent the quarter a thousand times, and each time to better advantage.

There was one other memory of the past, dim and faded, but stamped into his soul everlasting by the savage feet of his father. It was more like a nightmare than a remembered vision of a concrete thing – more like the race-memory of man that makes him fall in his sleep and that goes back to his arboreal ancestry.

This particular memory never came to Johnny in broad daylight when he was wide awake. It came at night, in bed, at the moment that his consciousness was sinking down and losing itself in sleep. It always aroused him to frightened wakefulness, and for the moment, in the first sickening start, it seemed to him that he lay crosswise on the foot of the bed. In the bed were the vague forms of his father and mother. He never saw what his father looked like. He had but one impression of his father, and that was that he had savage and pitiless feet.

His earlier memories lingered with him, but he had no late memories. All days were alike. Yesterday or last year were the same as a thousand years – or a minute. Nothing ever happened. There were no events to mark the march of time. Time did not march. It stood always still. It was only the whirling machines that moved, and they moved nowhere – in spite of the fact that they moved faster.

When he was fourteen, he went to work on the starcher. It was a colossal event. Something had at last happened that could

be remembered beyond a night's sleep or a week's pay-day. It marked an era. It was a machine Olympiad, a thing to date from. "When I went to work on the starcher," or, "after," or "before I went to work on the starcher," were sentences often on his lips.

He celebrated his sixteenth birthday by going into the loom room and taking a loom. Here was an incentive again, for it was piece-work. And he excelled, because the clay of him had been moulded by the mills into the perfect machine. At the end of three months he was running two looms, and, later, three and four.

At the end of his second year at the looms he was turning out more yards than any other weaver, and more than twice as much as some of the less skilful ones. And at home things began to prosper as he approached the full stature of his earning power. Not, however, that his increased earnings were in excess of need. The children were growing up. They ate more. And they were going to school, and school-books cost money. And somehow, the faster he worked, the faster climbed the prices of things. Even the rent went up, though the house had fallen from bad to worse disrepair.

He had grown taller; but with his increased height he seemed leaner than ever. Also, he was more nervous. With the nervousness increased his peevishness and irritability. The children had learned by many bitter lessons to fight shy of him. His mother respected him for his earning power, but somehow her respect was tinctured with fear.

There was no joyousness in life for him. The procession of the days he never saw. The nights he slept away in twitching unconsciousness. The rest of the time he worked, and his consciousness was machine consciousness. Outside this his mind was a blank. He had no ideals, and but one illusion; namely, that he drank excellent coffee. He was a work-beast. He had no mental life whatever; yet deep down in the crypts of his mind, unknown to him, were being weighed and sifted every hour of his toil, every movement of his hands, every twitch of his muscles, and preparations were making for a future course of action that would amaze him and all his little world.

It was in the late spring that he came home from work one night aware of unusual tiredness. There was a keen expectancy in the air as he sat down to the table, but he did not notice. He went through the meal in moody silence, mechanically eating what was before him. The children um'd and ah'd and made smacking noises with their mouths. But he was deaf to them.

“D’ye know what you’re eatin’?” his mother demanded at last, desperately.

He looked vacantly at the dish before him, and vacantly at her.

“Floatin’ island,” she announced triumphantly.

“Oh,” he said.

“Floating island!” the children chorussed loudly.

“Oh,” he said. And after two or three mouthfuls, he added, “I guess I ain’t hungry to-night.”

He dropped the spoon, shoved back his chair, and arose

wearily from the table.

“An’ I guess I’ll go to bed.”

His feet dragged more heavily than usual as he crossed the kitchen floor. Undressing was a Titan’s task, a monstrous futility, and he wept weakly as he crawled into bed, one shoe still on. He was aware of a rising, swelling something inside his head that made his brain thick and fuzzy. His lean fingers felt as big as his wrist, while in the ends of them was a remoteness of sensation vague and fuzzy like his brain. The small of his back ached intolerably. All his bones ached. He ached everywhere. And in his head began the shrieking, pounding, crashing, roaring of a million looms. All space was filled with flying shuttles. They darted in and out, intricately, amongst the stars. He worked a thousand looms himself, and ever they speeded up, faster and faster, and his brain unwound, faster and faster, and became the thread that fed the thousand flying shuttles.

He did not go to work next morning. He was too busy weaving colossally on the thousand looms that ran inside his head. His mother went to work, but first she sent for the doctor. It was a severe attack of la grippe, he said. Jennie served as nurse and carried out his instructions.

It was a very severe attack, and it was a week before Johnny dressed and tottered feebly across the floor. Another week, the doctor said, and he would be fit to return to work. The foreman of the loom room visited him on Sunday afternoon, the first day of his convalescence. The best weaver in the room, the foreman

told his mother. His job would be held for him. He could come back to work a week from Monday.

“Why don’t you thank ‘im, Johnny?” his mother asked anxiously.

“He’s ben that sick he ain’t himself yet,” she explained apologetically to the visitor.

Johnny sat hunched up and gazing steadfastly at the floor. He sat in the same position long after the foreman had gone. It was warm outdoors, and he sat on the stoop in the afternoon. Sometimes his lips moved. He seemed lost in endless calculations.

Next morning, after the day grew warm, he took his seat on the stoop. He had pencil and paper this time with which to continue his calculations, and he calculated painfully and amazingly.

“What comes after millions?” he asked at noon, when Will came home from school. “An’ how d’ye work ‘em?”

That afternoon finished his task. Each day, but without paper and pencil, he returned to the stoop. He was greatly absorbed in the one tree that grew across the street. He studied it for hours at a time, and was unusually interested when the wind swayed its branches and fluttered its leaves. Throughout the week he seemed lost in a great communion with himself. On Sunday, sitting on the stoop, he laughed aloud, several times, to the perturbation of his mother, who had not heard him laugh for years.

Next morning, in the early darkness, she came to his bed to

rouse him. He had had his fill of sleep all the week, and awoke easily. He made no struggle, nor did he attempt to hold on to the bedding when she stripped it from him. He lay quietly, and spoke quietly.

“It ain’t no use, ma.”

“You’ll be late,” she said, under the impression that he was still stupid with sleep.

“I’m awake, ma, an’ I tell you it ain’t no use. You might as well lemme alone. I ain’t goin’ to git up.”

“But you’ll lose your job!” she cried.

“I ain’t goin’ to git up,” he repeated in a strange, passionless voice.

She did not go to work herself that morning. This was sickness beyond any sickness she had ever known. Fever and delirium she could understand; but this was insanity. She pulled the bedding up over him and sent Jennie for the doctor.

When that person arrived, Johnny was sleeping gently, and gently he awoke and allowed his pulse to be taken.

“Nothing the matter with him,” the doctor reported. “Badly debilitated, that’s all. Not much meat on his bones.”

“He’s always been that way,” his mother volunteered.

“Now go ‘way, ma, an’ let me finish my snooze.”

Johnny spoke sweetly and placidly, and sweetly and placidly he rolled over on his side and went to sleep.

At ten o’clock he awoke and dressed himself. He walked out into the kitchen, where he found his mother with a frightened

expression on her face.

“I’m goin’ away, ma,” he announced, “an’ I jes’ want to say good-bye.”

She threw her apron over her head and sat down suddenly and wept. He waited patiently.

“I might a-known it,” she was sobbing.

“Where?” she finally asked, removing the apron from her head and gazing up at him with a stricken face in which there was little curiosity.

“I don’t know – anywhere.”

As he spoke, the tree across the street appeared with dazzling brightness on his inner vision. It seemed to lurk just under his eyelids, and he could see it whenever he wished.

“An’ your job?” she quavered.

“I ain’t never goin’ to work again.”

“My God, Johnny!” she wailed, “don’t say that!”

What he had said was blasphemy to her. As a mother who hears her child deny God, was Johnny’s mother shocked by his words.

“What’s got into you, anyway?” she demanded, with a lame attempt at imperativeness.

“Figures,” he answered. “Jes’ figures. I’ve ben doin’ a lot of figurin’ this week, an’ it’s most surprisin’.”

“I don’t see what that’s got to do with it,” she sniffled.

Johnny smiled patiently, and his mother was aware of a distinct shock at the persistent absence of his peevishness and

irritability.

“I’ll show you,” he said. “I’m plum’ tired out. What makes me tired? Moves. I’ve ben movin’ ever since I was born. I’m tired of movin’, an’ I ain’t goin’ to move any more. Remember when I worked in the glass-house? I used to do three hundred dozen a day. Now I reckon I made about ten different moves to each bottle. That’s thirty-six thousan’ moves a day. Ten days, three hundred an’ sixty thousan’ moves. One month, one million an’ eighty thousan’ moves. Chuck out the eighty thousan’” – he spoke with the complacent beneficence of a philanthropist – “chuck out the eighty thousan’, that leaves a million moves a month – twelve million moves a year.

“At the looms I’m movin’ twic’st as much. That makes twenty-five million moves a year, an’ it seems to me I’ve ben a movin’ that way ‘most a million years.

“Now this week I ain’t moved at all. I ain’t made one move in hours an’ hours. I tell you it was swell, jes’ settin’ there, hours an’ hours, an’ doin’ nothin’. I ain’t never ben happy before. I never had any time. I’ve ben movin’ all the time. That ain’t no way to be happy. An’ I ain’t going to do it any more. I’m jes’ goin’ to set, an’ set, an’ rest, an’ rest, and then rest some more.”

“But what’s goin’ to come of Will an’ the children?” she asked despairingly.

“That’s it, ‘Will an’ the children,’” he repeated.

But there was no bitterness in his voice. He had long known his mother’s ambition for the younger boy, but the thought of it

no longer rankled. Nothing mattered any more. Not even that.

“I know, ma, what you’ve ben plannin’ for Will – keepin’ him in school to make a book-keeper out of him. But it ain’t no use, I’ve quit. He’s got to go to work.”

“An’ after I have brung you up the way I have,” she wept, starting to cover her head with the apron and changing her mind.

“You never brung me up,” he answered with sad kindness. “I brung myself up, ma, an’ I brung up Will. He’s bigger’n me, an’ heavier, an’ taller. When I was a kid, I reckon I didn’t git enough to eat. When he come along an’ was a kid, I was workin’ an’ earnin’ grub for him too. But that’s done with. Will can go to work, same as me, or he can go to hell, I don’t care which. I’m tired. I’m goin’ now. Ain’t you goin’ to say goodbye?”

She made no reply. The apron had gone over her head again, and she was crying. He paused a moment in the doorway.

“I’m sure I done the best I knew how,” she was sobbing.

He passed out of the house and down the street. A wan delight came into his face at the sight of the lone tree. “Jes’ ain’t goin’ to do nothin’,” he said to himself, half aloud, in a crooning tone. He glanced wistfully up at the sky, but the bright sun dazzled and blinded him.

It was a long walk he took, and he did not walk fast. It took him past the jute-mill. The muffled roar of the loom room came to his ears, and he smiled. It was a gentle, placid smile. He hated no one, not even the pounding, shrieking machines. There was no bitterness in him, nothing but an inordinate hunger for rest.

The houses and factories thinned out and the open spaces increased as he approached the country. At last the city was behind him, and he was walking down a leafy lane beside the railroad track. He did not walk like a man. He did not look like a man. He was a travesty of the human. It was a twisted and stunted and nameless piece of life that shambled like a sickly ape, arms loose-hanging, stoop-shouldered, narrow-chested, grotesque and terrible.

He passed by a small railroad station and lay down in the grass under a tree. All afternoon he lay there. Sometimes he dozed, with muscles that twitched in his sleep. When awake, he lay without movement, watching the birds or looking up at the sky through the branches of the tree above him. Once or twice he laughed aloud, but without relevance to anything he had seen or felt.

After twilight had gone, in the first darkness of the night, a freight train rumbled into the station. When the engine was switching cars on to the side-track, Johnny crept along the side of the train. He pulled open the side-door of an empty box-car and awkwardly and laboriously climbed in. He closed the door. The engine whistled. Johnny was lying down, and in the darkness he smiled.

A WICKED WOMAN

It was because she had broken with Billy that Loretta had come visiting to Santa Clara. Billy could not understand. His sister had reported that he had walked the floor and cried all night. Loretta had not slept all night either, while she had wept most of the night. Daisy knew this, because it was in her arms that the weeping had been done. And Daisy's husband, Captain Kitt, knew, too. The tears of Loretta, and the comforting by Daisy, had lost him some sleep.

Now Captain Kitt did not like to lose sleep. Neither did he want Loretta to marry Billy – nor anybody else. It was Captain Kitt's belief that Daisy needed the help of her younger sister in the household. But he did not say this aloud. Instead, he always insisted that Loretta was too young to think of marriage. So it was Captain Kitt's idea that Loretta should be packed off on a visit to Mrs. Hemingway. There wouldn't be any Billy there.

Before Loretta had been at Santa Clara a week, she was convinced that Captain Kitt's idea was a good one. In the first place, though Billy wouldn't believe it, she did not want to marry Billy. And in the second place, though Captain Kitt wouldn't believe it, she did not want to leave Daisy. By the time Loretta had been at Santa Clara two weeks, she was absolutely certain that she did not want to marry Billy. But she was not so sure about not wanting to leave Daisy. Not that she loved Daisy less,

but that she – had doubts.

The day of Loretta's arrival, a nebulous plan began shaping itself in Mrs. Hemingway's brain. The second day she remarked to Jack Hemingway, her husband, that Loretta was so innocent a young thing that were it not for her sweet guilelessness she would be positively stupid. In proof of which, Mrs. Hemingway told her husband several things that made him chuckle. By the third day Mrs. Hemingway's plan had taken recognizable form. Then it was that she composed a letter. On the envelope she wrote: "Mr. Edward Bashford, Athenian Club, San Francisco."

"Dear Ned," the letter began. She had once been violently loved by him for three weeks in her pre-marital days. But she had covenanted herself to Jack Hemingway, who had prior claims, and her heart as well; and Ned Bashford had philosophically not broken his heart over it. He merely added the experience to a large fund of similarly collected data out of which he manufactured philosophy. Artistically and temperamentally he was a Greek – a tired Greek. He was fond of quoting from Nietzsche, in token that he, too, had passed through the long sickness that follows upon the ardent search for truth; that he too had emerged, too experienced, too shrewd, too profound, ever again to be afflicted by the madness of youths in their love of truth. "To worship appearance," he often quoted; "to believe in forms, in tones, in words, in the whole Olympus of appearance!" This particular excerpt he always concluded with, "Those Greeks were superficial – OUT OF PROFUNDITY!"

He was a fairly young Greek, jaded and worn. Women were faithless and untruthful, he held – at such times that he had relapses and descended to pessimism from his wonted high philosophical calm. He did not believe in the truth of women; but, faithful to his German master, he did not strip from them the airy gauzes that veiled their untruth. He was content to accept them as appearances and to make the best of it. He was superficial – OUT OF PROFUNDITY.

“Jack says to be sure to say to you, ‘good swimming,’” Mrs. Hemingway wrote in her letter; “and also ‘to bring your fishing duds along.’” Mrs. Hemingway wrote other things in the letter. She told him that at last she was prepared to exhibit to him an absolutely true, unsullied, and innocent woman. “A more guileless, immaculate bud of womanhood never blushed on the planet,” was one of the several ways in which she phrased the inducement. And to her husband she said triumphantly, “If I don’t marry Ned off this time – ” leaving unstated the terrible alternative that she lacked either vocabulary to express or imagination to conceive.

Contrary to all her forebodings, Loretta found that she was not unhappy at Santa Clara. Truly, Billy wrote to her every day, but his letters were less distressing than his presence. Also, the ordeal of being away from Daisy was not so severe as she had expected. For the first time in her life she was not lost in eclipse in the blaze of Daisy’s brilliant and mature personality. Under such favourable circumstances Loretta came rapidly to the front,

while Mrs. Hemingway modestly and shamelessly retreated into the background.

Loretta began to discover that she was not a pale orb shining by reflection. Quite unconsciously she became a small centre of things. When she was at the piano, there was some one to turn the pages for her and to express preferences for certain songs. When she dropped her handkerchief, there was some one to pick it up. And there was some one to accompany her in ramblings and flower gatherings. Also, she learned to cast flies in still pools and below savage riffles, and how not to entangle silk lines and gut-leaders with the shrubbery.

Jack Hemingway did not care to teach beginners, and fished much by himself, or not at all, thus giving Ned Bashford ample time in which to consider Loretta as an appearance. As such, she was all that his philosophy demanded. Her blue eyes had the direct gaze of a boy, and out of his profundity he delighted in them and forbore to shudder at the duplicity his philosophy bade him to believe lurked in their depths. She had the grace of a slender flower, the fragility of colour and line of fine china, in all of which he pleased greatly, without thought of the Life Force palpitating beneath and in spite of Bernard Shaw – in whom he believed.

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