GALSWORTHY JOHN

THE FREELANDS

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Содержание

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PROLOGUE

One early April afternoon, in a Worcestershire field, the only field in that immediate landscape which was not down in grass, a man moved slowly athwart the furrows, sowing – a big man of heavy build, swinging his hairy brown arm with the grace of strength. He wore no coat or hat; a waistcoat, open over a blue-checked cotton shirt, flapped against belted corduroys that were somewhat the color of his square, pale-brown face and dusty hair. His eyes were sad, with the swimming yet fixed stare of epileptics; his mouth heavy-lipped, so that, but for the yearning eyes, the face would have been almost brutal. He looked as if he suffered from silence. The elm-trees bordering the field, though only just in leaf, showed dark against a white sky. A light wind blew, carrying already a scent from the earth and growth pushing up, for the year was early. The green Malvern hills rose in the west; and not far away, shrouded by trees, a long country house of weathered brick faced to the south. Save for the man sowing, and some rooks crossing from elm to elm, no life was visible in all the green land. And it was quiet – with a strange, a brooding tranquillity. The fields and hills seemed to mock the scars of

road and ditch and furrow scraped on them, to mock at barriers of hedge and wall – between the green land and white sky was a conspiracy to disregard those small activities. So lonely was it, so plunged in a ground-bass of silence; so much too big and permanent for any figure of man.

Across and across the brown loam the laborer doggedly finished out his task; scattered the few last seeds into a corner, and stood still. Thrushes and blackbirds were just beginning that even-song whose blitheness, as nothing else on earth, seems to promise youth forever to the land. He picked up his coat, slung it on, and, heaving a straw bag over his shoulder, walked out on to the grass-bordered road between the elms.

"Tryst! Bob Tryst!"

At the gate of a creepered cottage amongst fruit-trees, high above the road, a youth with black hair and pale-brown face stood beside a girl with frizzy brown hair and cheeks like poppies.

"Have you had that notice?"

The laborer answered slowly:

"Yes, Mr. Derek. If she don't go, I've got to."

"What a d – d shame!"

The laborer moved his head, as though he would have spoken, but no words came.

"Don't do anything, Bob. We'll see about that."

"Evenin', Mr. Derek. Evenin', Miss Sheila," and the laborer moved on.

The two at the wicket gate also turned away. A black-haired

woman dressed in blue came to the wicket gate in their place. There seemed no purpose in her standing there; it was perhaps an evening custom, some ceremony such as Moslems observe at the muezzin-call. And any one who saw her would have wondered what on earth she might be seeing, gazing out with her dark glowing eyes above the white, grass-bordered roads stretching empty this way and that between the elm-trees and green fields; while the blackbirds and thrushes shouted out their hearts, calling all to witness how hopeful and young was life in this English countryside…

CHAPTER I

Mayday afternoon in Oxford Street, and Felix Freeland, a little late, on his way from Hampstead to his brother John's house in Porchester Gardens. Felix Freeland, author, wearing the very first gray top hat of the season. A compromise, that – like many other things in his life and works – between individuality and the accepted view of things, aestheticism and fashion, the critical sense and authority. After the meeting at John's, to discuss the doings of the family of his brother Morton Freeland – better known as Tod – he would perhaps look in on the caricatures at the English Gallery, and visit one duchess in Mayfair, concerning the George Richard Memorial. And so, not the soft felt hat which really suited authorship, nor the black top hat which obliterated personality to the point of pain, but this gray thing with narrowish black band, very suitable, in truth, to a face of a pale buff color, to a moustache of a deep buff color streaked with a few gray hairs, to a black braided coat cut away from a buff-colored waistcoat, to his neat boots – not patent leather – faintly buffed with May-day dust. Even his eyes, Freeland gray, were a little buffed over by sedentary habit, and the number of things that he was conscious of. For instance, that the people passing him were distressingly plain, both men and women; plain with the particular plainness of those quite unaware of it. It struck him forcibly, while he went along, how very queer it was that with so many plain

people in the country, the population managed to keep up even as well as it did. To his wonderfully keen sense of defect, it seemed little short of marvellous. A shambling, shoddy crew, this crowd of shoppers and labor demonstrators! A conglomeration of hopelessly mediocre visages! What was to be done about it? Ah! what indeed! – since they were evidently not aware of their own dismal mediocrity. Hardly a beautiful or a vivid face, hardly a wicked one, never anything transfigured, passionate, terrible, or grand. Nothing Greek, early Italian, Elizabethan, not even beefy, beery, broad old Georgian. Something clutched-in, and squashed-out about it all – on that collective face something of the look of a man almost comfortably and warmly wrapped round by a snake at the very beginning of its squeeze. It gave Felix Freeland a sort of faint excitement and pleasure to notice this. For it was his business to notice things, and embalm them afterward in ink. And he believed that not many people noticed it, so that it contributed in his mind to his own distinction, which was precious to him. Precious, and encouraged to be so by the press, which – as he well knew – must print his name several thousand times a year. And yet, as a man of culture and of principle, how he despised that kind of fame, and theoretically believed that a man's real distinction lay in his oblivion of the world's opinion, particularly as expressed by that flighty creature, the Fourth Estate. But here again, as in the matter of the gray top hat, he had instinctively compromised, taking in press cuttings which described himself and his works, while he never failed to

describe those descriptions – good, bad, and indifferent – as 'that stuff,' and their writers as 'those fellows.'

Not that it was new to him to feel that the country was in a bad way. On the contrary, it was his established belief, and one for which he was prepared to furnish due and proper reasons. In the first place he traced it to the horrible hold Industrialism had in the last hundred years laid on the nation, draining the peasantry from 'the Land'; and in the second place to the influence of a narrow and insidious Officialism, sapping the independence of the People.

This was why, in going to a conclave with his brother John, high in Government employ, and his brother Stanley, a captain of industry, possessor of the Morton Plough Works, he was conscious of a certain superiority in that he, at all events, had no hand in this paralysis which was creeping on the country.

And getting more buff-colored every minute, he threaded his way on, till, past the Marble Arch, he secured the elbow-room of Hyde Park. Here groups of young men, with chivalrous idealism, were jeering at and chivying the broken remnants of a suffrage meeting. Felix debated whether he should oppose his body to their bodies, his tongue to theirs, or whether he should avert his consciousness and hurry on; but, that instinct which moved him to wear the gray top hat prevailing, he did neither, and stood instead, looking at them in silent anger, which quickly provoked endearments – such as: "Take it off," or "Keep it on," or "What cheer, Toppy!" but nothing more acute. And he

meditated: Culture! Could culture ever make headway among the blind partisanships, the hand-to-mouth mentality, the cheap excitements of this town life? The faces of these youths, the tone of their voices, the very look of their bowler hats, said: No! You could not culturalize the impermeable texture of their vulgarity. And they were the coming manhood of the nation – this inexpressibly distasteful lot of youths! The country had indeed got too far away from 'the Land.' And this essential towny commonness was not confined to the classes from which these youths were drawn. He had even remarked it among his own son's school and college friends – an impatience of discipline, an insensibility to everything but excitement and having a good time, a permanent mental indigestion due to a permanent diet of tit-bits. What aspiration they possessed seemed devoted to securing for themselves the plums of official or industrial life. His boy Alan, even, was infected, in spite of home influences and the atmosphere of art in which he had been so sedulously soaked. He wished to enter his Uncle Stanley's plough works, seeing in it a 'soft thing.'

But the last of the woman-baiters had passed by now, and, conscious that he was really behind time, Felix hurried on…

In his study – a pleasant room, if rather tidy – John Freeland was standing before the fire smoking a pipe and looking thoughtfully at nothing. He was, in fact, thinking, with that continuity characteristic of a man who at fifty has won for himself a place of permanent importance in the Home Office.

Starting life in the Royal Engineers, he still preserved something of a military look about his figure, and grave visage with steady eyes and drooping moustache (both a shade grayer than those of Felix), and a forehead bald from justness and knowing where to lay his hand on papers. His face was thinner, his head narrower, than his brother's, and he had acquired a way of making those he looked at doubt themselves and feel the sudden instability of all their facts. He was – as has been said – thinking. His brother Stanley had wired to him that morning: "Am motoring up to-day on business; can you get Felix to come at six o'clock and talk over the position at Tod's?" What position at Tod's? He had indeed heard something vague – of those youngsters of Tod's, and some fuss they were making about the laborers down there. He had not liked it. Too much of a piece with the general unrest, and these new democratic ideas that were playing old Harry with the country! For in his opinion the country was in a bad way, partly owing to Industrialism, with its rotting effect upon physique; partly to this modern analytic Intellectualism, with its destructive and anarchic influence on morals. It was difficult to overestimate the mischief of those two factors; and in the approaching conference with his brothers, one of whom was the head of an industrial undertaking, and the other a writer, whose books, extremely modern, he never read, he was perhaps vaguely conscious of his own cleaner hands. Hearing a car come to a halt outside, he went to the window and looked out. Yes, it was Stanley!..

Stanley Freeland, who had motored up from Becket – his country place, close to his plough works in Worcestershire – stood a moment on the pavement, stretching his long legs and giving directions to his chauffeur. He had been stopped twice on the road for not-exceeding the limit as he believed, and was still a little ruffled. Was it not his invariable principle to be moderate in speed as in all other things? And his feeling at the moment was stronger even than usual, that the country was in a bad way, eaten up by officialism, with its absurd limitations of speed and the liberty of the subject, and the advanced ideas of these new writers and intellectuals, always talking about the rights and sufferings of the poor. There was no progress along either of those roads. He had it in his heart, as he stood there on the pavement, to say something pretty definite to John about interference with the liberty of the subject, and he wouldn't mind giving old Felix a rap about his precious destructive doctrines, and continual girding at the upper classes, vested interests, and all the rest of it. If he had something to put in their place that would be another matter. Capital and those who controlled it were the backbone of the country – what there was left of the country, apart from these d – d officials and aesthetic fellows! And with a contraction of his straight eyebrows above his straight gray eyes, straight blunt nose, blunter moustaches, and blunt chin, he kept a tight rein on his blunt tongue, not choosing to give way even to his own anger.

Then, perceiving Felix coming – 'in a white topper, by Jove!' – he crossed the pavement to the door; and, tall, square,

personable, rang the bell.

CHAPTER II

"Well, what's the matter at Tod's?"

And Felix moved a little forward in his chair, his eyes fixed with interest on Stanley, who was about to speak.

"It's that wife of his, of course. It was all very well so long as she confined herself to writing, and talk, and that Land Society, or whatever it was she founded, the one that snuffed out the other day; but now she's getting herself and those two youngsters mixed up in our local broils, and really I think Tod's got to be spoken to."

"It's impossible for a husband to interfere with his wife's principles." So Felix.

"Principles!" The word came from John.

"Certainly! Kirsteen's a woman of great character; revolutionary by temperament. Why should you expect her to act as you would act yourselves?"

When Felix had said that, there was a silence.

Then Stanley muttered: "Poor old Tod!"

Felix sighed, lost for a moment in his last vision of his youngest brother. It was four years ago now, a summer evening – Tod standing between his youngsters Derek and Sheila, in a doorway of his white, black-timbered, creepered cottage, his sunburnt face and blue eyes the serenest things one could see in a day's march!

"Why 'poor'?" he said. "Tod's much happier than we are. You've only to look at him."

"Ah!" said Stanley suddenly. "D'you remember him at Father's funeral? – without his hat, and his head in the clouds. Fine-lookin' chap, old Tod – pity he's such a child of Nature."

Felix said quietly:

"If you'd offered him a partnership, Stanley – it would have been the making of him."

"Tod in the plough works? My hat!"

Felix smiled. At sight of that smile, Stanley grew red, and John refilled his pipe. It is always the devil to have a brother more sarcastic than oneself!

"How old are those two?" John said abruptly.

"Sheila's twenty, Derek nineteen."

"I thought the boy was at an agricultural college?"

"Finished."

"What's he like?"

"A black-haired, fiery fellow, not a bit like Tod."

John muttered: "That's her Celtic blood. Her father, old Colonel Moray, was just that sort; by George, he was a regular black Highlander. What's the trouble exactly?"

It was Stanley who answered: "That sort of agitation business is all very well until it begins to affect your neighbors; then it's time it stopped. You know the Mallorings who own all the land round Tod's. Well, they've fallen foul of the Mallorings over what they call injustice to some laborers. Questions of morality

involved. I don't know all the details. A man's got notice to quit over his deceased wife's sister; and some girl or other in another cottage has kicked over – just ordinary country incidents. What I want is that Tod should be made to see that his family mustn't quarrel with his nearest neighbors in this way. We know the Mallorings well, they're only seven miles from us at Becket. It doesn't do; sooner or later it plays the devil all round. And the air's full of agitation about the laborers and 'the Land,' and all the rest of it – only wants a spark to make real trouble."

And having finished this oration, Stanley thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and jingled the money that was there.

John said abruptly:

"Felix, you'd better go down."

Felix was sitting back, his eyes for once withdrawn from his brothers' faces.

"Odd," he said, "really odd, that with a perfectly unique person like Tod for a brother, we only see him once in a blue moon."

"It's because he IS so d – d unique."

Felix got up and gravely extended his hand to Stanley.

"By Jove," he said, "you've spoken truth." And to John he added: "Well, I WILL go, and let you know the upshot."

When he had departed, the two elder brothers remained for some moments silent, then Stanley said:

"Old Felix is a bit tryin'! With the fuss they make of him in the papers, his head's swelled!"

John did not answer. One could not in so many words resent

one's own brother being made a fuss of, and if it had been for something real, such as discovering the source of the Black River, conquering Bechuanaland, curing Blue-mange, or being made a Bishop, he would have been the first and most loyal in his appreciation; but for the sort of thing Felix made up – Fiction, and critical, acid, destructive sort of stuff, pretending to show John Freeland things that he hadn't seen before – as if Felix could! – not at all the jolly old romance which one could read well enough and enjoy till it sent you to sleep after a good day's work. No! that Felix should be made a fuss of for such work as that really almost hurt him. It was not quite decent, violating deep down one's sense of form, one's sense of health, one's traditions. Though he would not have admitted it, he secretly felt, too, that this fuss was dangerous to his own point of view, which was, of course, to him the only real one. And he merely said:

"Will you stay to dinner, Stan?"

CHAPTER III

If John had those sensations about Felix, so – when he was away from John – had Felix about himself. He had never quite grown out of the feeling that to make himself conspicuous in any way was bad form. In common with his three brothers he had been through the mills of gentility – those unique grinding machines of education only found in his native land. Tod, to be sure, had been publicly sacked at the end of his third term, for climbing on to the headmaster's roof and filling up two of his chimneys with football pants, from which he had omitted to remove his name. Felix still remembered the august scene – the horrid thrill of it, the ominous sound of that: "Freeland minimus!" the ominous sight of poor little Tod emerging from his obscurity near the roof of the Speech Room, and descending all those steps. How very small and rosy he had looked, his bright hair standing on end, and his little blue eyes staring up very hard from under a troubled frown. And the august hand holding up those sooty pants, and the august voice: "These appear to be yours, Freeland minimus. Were you so good as to put them down my chimneys?" And the little piping, "Yes, sir."

"May I ask why, Freeland minimus?"

"I don't know, sir."

"You must have had some reason, Freeland minimus?"

"It was the end of term, sir."

"Ah! You must not come back here, Freeland minimus. You are too dangerous, to yourself, and others. Go to your place."

And poor little Tod ascending again all those steps, cheeks more terribly rosy than ever, eyes bluer, from under a still more troubled frown; little mouth hard set; and breathing so that you could hear him six forms off. True, the new Head had been goaded by other outrages, the authors of which had not omitted to remove their names; but the want of humor, the amazing want of humor! As if it had not been a sign of first-rate stuff in Tod! And to this day Felix remembered with delight the little bubbling hiss that he himself had started, squelched at once, but rippling out again along the rows like tiny scattered lines of fire when a conflagration is suppressed. Expulsion had been the salvation of Tod! Or – his damnation? Which? God would know, but Felix was not certain. Having himself been fifteen years acquiring 'Mill' philosophy, and another fifteen years getting rid of it, he had now begun to think that after all there might be something in it. A philosophy that took everything, including itself, at face value, and questioned nothing, was sedative to nerves too highly strung by the continual examination of the insides of oneself and others, with a view to their alteration. Tod, of course, having been sent to Germany after his expulsion, as one naturally would be, and then put to farming, had never properly acquired 'Mill' manner, and never sloughed it off; and yet he was as sedative a man as you could meet.

Emerging from the Tube station at Hampstead, he moved

toward home under a sky stranger than one might see in a whole year of evenings. Between the pine-trees on the ridge it was opaque and colored like pinkish stone, and all around violent purple with flames of the young green, and white spring blossom lit against it. Spring had been dull and unimaginative so far, but this evening it was all fire and gathered torrents; Felix wondered at the waiting passion of that sky.

He reached home just as those torrents began to fall.

The old house, beyond the Spaniard's Road, save for mice and a faint underlying savor of wood-rot in two rooms, well satisfied the aesthetic sense. Felix often stood in his hall, study, bedroom, and other apartments, admiring the rich and simple glow of them – admiring the rarity and look of studied negligence about the stuffs, the flowers, the books, the furniture, the china; and then quite suddenly the feeling would sweep over him: "By George, do I really own all this, when my ideal is 'bread and water, and on feast days a little bit of cheese'?" True, he was not to blame for the niceness of his things – Flora did it; but still – there they were, a little hard to swallow for an epicurean. It might, of course, have been worse, for if Flora had a passion for collecting, it was a very chaste one, and though what she collected cost no little money, it always looked as if it had been inherited, and – as everybody knows – what has been inherited must be put up with, whether it be a coronet or a cruet-stand.

To collect old things, and write poetry! It was a career; one would not have one's wife otherwise. She might, for instance,

have been like Stanley's wife, Clara, whose career was wealth and station; or John's wife, Anne, whose career had been cut short; or even Tod's wife, Kirsteen, whose career was revolution. No – a wife who had two, and only two children, and treated them with affectionate surprise, who was never out of temper, never in a hurry, knew the points of a book or play, could cut your hair at a pinch; whose hand was dry, figure still good, verse tolerable, and – above all – who wished for no better fate than Fate had given her – was a wife not to be sneezed at. And Felix never had. He had depicted so many sneezing wives and husbands in his books, and knew the value of a happy marriage better perhaps than any one in England. He had laid marriage low a dozen times, wrecked it on all sorts of rocks, and had the greater veneration for his own, which had begun early, manifested every symptom of ending late, and in the meantime walked down the years holding hands fast, and by no means forgetting to touch lips.

Hanging up the gray top hat, he went in search of her. He found her in his dressing-room, surrounded by a number of little bottles, which she was examining vaguely, and putting one by one into an 'inherited' waste-paper basket. Having watched her for a little while with a certain pleasure, he said:

"Yes, my dear?"

Noticing his presence, and continuing to put bottles into the basket, she answered:

"I thought I must – they're what dear Mother's given us."

There they lay – little bottles filled with white and brown

fluids, white and blue and brown powders; green and brown and yellow ointments; black lozenges; buff plasters; blue and pink and purple pills. All beautifully labelled and corked.

And he said in a rather faltering voice:

"Bless her! How she does give her things away! Haven't we used ANY?"

"Not one. And they have to be cleared away before they're stale, for fear we might take one by mistake."

"Poor Mother!"

"My dear, she's found something newer than them all by now."

Felix sighed.

"The nomadic spirit. I have it, too!"

And a sudden vision came to him of his mother's carved ivory face, kept free of wrinkles by sheer will-power, its firm chin, slightly aquiline nose, and measured brows; its eyes that saw everything so quickly, so fastidiously, its compressed mouth that smiled sweetly, with a resolute but pathetic acceptation. Of the piece of fine lace, sometimes black, sometimes white, over her gray hair. Of her hands, so thin now, always moving a little, as if all the composure and care not to offend any eye by allowing Time to ravage her face, were avenging themselves in that constant movement. Of her figure, that was short but did not seem so, still quick-moving, still alert, and always dressed in black or gray. A vision of that exact, fastidious, wandering spirit called Frances Fleeming Freeland – that spirit strangely compounded of domination and humility, of acceptation and

cynicism; precise and actual to the point of desert dryness; generous to a point that caused her family to despair; and always, beyond all things, brave.

Flora dropped the last little bottle, and sitting on the edge of the bath let her eyebrows rise. How pleasant was that impersonal humor which made her superior to other wives!

"You – nomadic? How?"

"Mother travels unceasingly from place to place, person to person, thing to thing. I travel unceasingly from motive to motive, mind to mind; my native air is also desert air – hence the sterility of my work."

Flora rose, but her eyebrows descended.

"Your work," she said, "is not sterile."

"That, my dear," said Felix, "is prejudice." And perceiving that she was going to kiss him, he waited without annoyance. For a woman of forty-two, with two children and three books of poems – and not knowing which had taken least out of her – with hazel-gray eyes, wavy eyebrows darker than they should have been, a glint of red in her hair; wavy figure and lips; quaint, half-humorous indolence, quaint, half-humorous warmth – was she not as satisfactory a woman as a man could possibly have married!

"I have got to go down and see Tod," he said. "I like that wife of his; but she has no sense of humor. How much better principles are in theory than in practice!"

Flora repeated softly, as if to herself:

"I'm glad I have none." She was at the window leaning out, and Felix took his place beside her. The air was full of scent from wet leaves, alive with the song of birds thanking the sky. Suddenly he felt her arm round his ribs; either it or they – which, he could not at the moment tell – seemed extraordinarily soft…

Between Felix and his young daughter, Nedda, there existed the only kind of love, except a mother's, which has much permanence – love based on mutual admiration. Though why Nedda, with her starry innocence, should admire him, Felix could never understand, not realizing that she read his books, and even analyzed them for herself in the diary which she kept religiously, writing it when she ought to have been asleep. He had therefore no knowledge of the way his written thoughts stimulated the ceaseless questioning that was always going on within her; the thirst to know why this was and that was not. Why, for instance, her heart ached so some days and felt light and eager other days? Why, when people wrote and talked of God, they seemed to know what He was, and she never did? Why people had to suffer; and the world be black to so many millions? Why one could not love more than one man at a time? Why – a thousand things? Felix's books supplied no answers to these questions, but they were comforting; for her real need as yet was not for answers, but ever for more questions, as a young bird's need is for opening its beak without quite knowing what is coming out or going in. When she and her father walked, or sat, or went to concerts together, their talk was neither particularly

intimate nor particularly voluble; they made to each other no great confidences. Yet each was certain that the other was not bored – a great thing; and they squeezed each other's little fingers a good deal – very warming. Now with his son Alan, Felix had a continual sensation of having to keep up to a mark and never succeeding – a feeling, as in his favorite nightmare, of trying to pass an examination for which he had neglected to prepare; of having to preserve, in fact, form proper to the father of Alan Freeland. With Nedda he had a sense of refreshment; the delight one has on a spring day, watching a clear stream, a bank of flowers, birds flying. And Nedda with her father – what feeling had she? To be with him was like a long stroking with a touch of tickle in it; to read his books, a long tickle with a nice touch of stroking now and then when one was not expecting it.

That night after dinner, when Alan had gone out and Flora into a dream, she snuggled up alongside her father, got hold of his little finger, and whispered:

"Come into the garden, Dad; I'll put on goloshes. It's an awfully nice moon."

The moon indeed was palest gold behind the pines, so that its radiance was a mere shower of pollen, just a brushing of white moth-down over the reeds of their little dark pond, and the black blur of the flowering currant bushes. And the young lime-trees, not yet in full leaf, quivered ecstatically in that moon-witchery, still letting fall raindrops of the past spring torrent, with soft hissing sounds. A real sense in the garden, of God holding

his breath in the presence of his own youth swelling, growing, trembling toward perfection! Somewhere a bird – a thrush, they thought – mixed in its little mind as to night and day, was queerly chirruping. And Felix and his daughter went along the dark wet paths, holding each other's arms, not talking much. For, in him, very responsive to the moods of Nature, there was a flattered feeling, with that young arm in his, of Spring having chosen to confide in him this whispering, rustling hour. And in Nedda was so much of that night's unutterable youth – no wonder she was silent! Then, somehow – neither responsible – they stood motionless. How quiet it was, but for a distant dog or two, and the stilly shivering-down of the water drops, and the far vibration of the million-voiced city! How quiet and soft and fresh! Then Nedda spoke:

"Dad, I do so want to know everything."

Not rousing even a smile, with its sublime immodesty, that aspiration seemed to Felix infinitely touching. What less could youth want in the very heart of Spring? And, watching her face put up to the night, her parted lips, and the moon-gleam fingering her white throat, he answered:

"It'll all come soon enough, my pretty!"

To think that she must come to an end like the rest, having found out almost nothing, having discovered just herself, and the particle of God that was within her! But he could not, of course, say this.

"I want to FEEL. Can't I begin?"

How many millions of young creatures all the world over were sending up that white prayer to climb and twine toward the stars, and – fall to earth again! And nothing to be answered, but:

"Time enough, Nedda!"

"But, Dad, there are such heaps of things, such heaps of people, and reasons, and – and life; and I know nothing. Dreams are the only times, it seems to me, that one finds out anything."

"As for that, my child, I am exactly in your case. What's to be done for us?"

She slid her hand through his arm again.

"Don't laugh at me!"

"Heaven forbid! I meant it. You're finding out much quicker than I. It's all folk-music to you still; to me Strauss and the rest of the tired stuff. The variations my mind spins – wouldn't I just swap them for the tunes your mind is making?"

"I don't seem making tunes at all. I don't seem to have anything to make them of. Take me down to see 'the Tods,' Dad!"

Why not? And yet – ! Just as in this spring night Felix felt so much, so very much, lying out there behind the still and moony dark, such marvellous holding of breath and waiting sentiency, so behind this innocent petition, he could not help the feeling of a lurking fatefulness. That was absurd. And he said: "If you wish it, by all means. You'll like your Uncle Tod; as to the others, I can't say, but your aunt is an experience, and experiences are what you want, it seems."

Fervently, without speech, Nedda squeezed his arm.

CHAPTER IV

Stanley Freeland's country house, Becket, was almost a show place. It stood in its park and pastures two miles from the little town of Transham and the Morton Plough Works; close to the ancestral home of the Moretons, his mother's family – that home burned down by Roundheads in the Civil War. The site – certain vagaries in the ground – Mrs. Stanley had caused to be walled round, and consecrated so to speak with a stone medallion on which were engraved the aged Moreton arms – arrows and crescent moons in proper juxtaposition. Peacocks, too – that bird 'parlant,' from the old Moreton crest – were encouraged to dwell there and utter their cries, as of passionate souls lost in too comfortable surroundings.

By one of those freaks of which Nature is so prodigal, Stanley – owner of this native Moreton soil – least of all four Freeland brothers, had the Moreton cast of mind and body. That was why he made so much more money than the other three put together, and had been able, with the aid of Clara's undoubted genius for rank and station, to restore a strain of Moreton blood to its rightful position among the county families of Worcestershire. Bluff and without sentiment, he himself set little store by that, smiling up his sleeve – for he was both kindly and prudent – at his wife who had been a Tomson. It was not in Stanley to appreciate the peculiar flavor of the Moretons, that something

which in spite of their naivete and narrowness, had really been rather fine. To him, such Moretons as were left were 'dry enough sticks, clean out of it.' They were of a breed that was already gone, the simplest of all country gentlemen, dating back to the Conquest, without one solitary conspicuous ancestor, save the one who had been physician to a king and perished without issue – marrying from generation to generation exactly their own equals; living simple, pious, parochial lives; never in trade, never making money, having a tradition and a practice of gentility more punctilious than the so-called aristocracy; constitutionally paternal and maternal to their dependents, constitutionally so convinced that those dependents and all indeed who were not 'gentry,' were of different clay, that they were entirely simple and entirely without arrogance, carrying with them even now a sort of Early atmosphere of archery and home-made cordials, lavender and love of clergy, together with frequent use of the word 'nice,' a peculiar regularity of feature, and a complexion that was rather parchmenty. High Church people and Tories, naturally, to a man and woman, by sheer inbred absence of ideas, and sheer inbred conviction that nothing else was nice; but withal very considerate of others, really plucky in bearing their own ills; not greedy, and not wasteful.

Of Becket, as it now was, they would not have approved at all. By what chance Edmund Moreton (Stanley's mother's grandfather), in the middle of the eighteenth century, had suddenly diverged from family feeling and ideals, and taken that

'not quite nice' resolution to make ploughs and money, would never now be known. The fact remained, together with the plough works. A man apparently of curious energy and character, considering his origin, he had dropped the E from his name, and – though he continued the family tradition so far as to marry a Fleeming of Worcestershire, to be paternal to his workmen, to be known as Squire, and to bring his children up in the older Moreton 'niceness' – he had yet managed to make his ploughs quite celebrated, to found a little town, and die still handsome and clean-shaved at the age of sixty-six. Of his four sons, only two could be found sufficiently without the E to go on making ploughs. Stanley's grandfather, Stuart Morton, indeed, had tried hard, but in the end had reverted to the congenital instinct for being just a Moreton. An extremely amiable man, he took to wandering with his family, and died in France, leaving one daughter – Frances, Stanley's mother – and three sons, one of whom, absorbed in horses, wandered to Australia and was killed by falling from them; one of whom, a soldier, wandered to India, and the embraces of a snake; and one of whom wandered into the embraces of the Holy Roman Church.

The Morton Plough Works were dry and dwindling when Stanley's father, seeking an opening for his son, put him and money into them. From that moment they had never looked back, and now brought Stanley, the sole proprietor, an income of full fifteen thousand pounds a year. He wanted it. For Clara, his wife, had that energy of aspiration which before now has

raised women to positions of importance in the counties which are not their own, and caused, incidentally, many acres to go out of cultivation. Not one plough was used on the whole of Becket, not even a Morton plough – these indeed were unsuitable to English soil and were all sent abroad. It was the corner-stone of his success that Stanley had completely seen through the talked-of revival of English agriculture, and sedulously cultivated the foreign market. This was why the Becket dining-room could contain without straining itself large quantities of local magnates and celebrities from London, all deploring the condition of 'the Land,' and discussing without end the regrettable position of the agricultural laborer. Except for literary men and painters, present in small quantities to leaven the lump, Becket was, in fact, a rallying point for the advanced spirits of Land Reform – one of those places where they were sure of being well done at week-ends, and of congenial and even stimulating talk about the undoubted need for doing something, and the designs which were being entertained upon 'the Land' by either party. This very heart of English country that the old Moretons in their paternal way had so religiously farmed, making out of its lush grass and waving corn a simple and by no means selfish or ungenerous subsistence, was now entirely lawns, park, coverts, and private golf course, together with enough grass to support the kine which yielded that continual stream of milk necessary to Clara's entertainments and children, all female, save little Francis, and still of tender years. Of gardeners, keepers, cow-men, chauffeurs, footmen,

stablemen – full twenty were supported on those fifteen hundred acres that formed the little Becket demesne. Of agricultural laborers proper – that vexed individual so much in the air, so reluctant to stay on 'the Land,' and so difficult to house when he was there, there were fortunately none, so that it was possible for Stanley, whose wife meant him to 'put up' for the Division, and his guests, who were frequently in Parliament, to hold entirely unbiassed and impersonal views upon the whole question so long as they were at Becket.

It was beautiful there, too, with the bright open fields hedged with great elms, and that ever-rich serenity of its grass and trees. The white house, timbered with dark beams in true Worcestershire fashion, and added-to from time to time, had preserved, thanks to a fine architect, an old-fashioned air of spacious presidency above its gardens and lawns. On the long artificial lake, with innumerable rushy nooks and water-lilies and coverture of leaves floating flat and bright in the sun, the half-tame wild duck and shy water-hens had remote little worlds, and flew and splashed when all Becket was abed, quite as if the human spirit, with its monkey-tricks and its little divine flame, had not yet been born.

Under the shade of a copper-beech, just where the drive cut through into its circle before the house, an old lady was sitting that afternoon on a campstool. She was dressed in gray alpaca, light and cool, and had on her iron-gray hair a piece of black lace. A number of Hearth and Home and a little pair of scissors,

suspended by an inexpensive chain from her waist, rested on her knee, for she had been meaning to cut out for dear Felix a certain recipe for keeping the head cool; but, as a fact, she sat without doing so, very still, save that, now and then, she compressed her pale fine lips, and continually moved her pale fine hands. She was evidently waiting for something that promised excitement, even pleasure, for a little rose-leaf flush had quavered up into a face that was colored like parchment; and her gray eyes under regular and still-dark brows, very far apart, between which there was no semblance of a wrinkle, seemed noting little definite things about her, almost unwillingly, as an Arab's or a Red Indian's eyes will continue to note things in the present, however their minds may be set on the future. So sat Frances Fleeming Freeland (nee Morton) waiting for the arrival of her son Felix and her grandchildren Alan and Nedda.

She marked presently an old man limping slowly on a stick toward where the drive debouched, and thought at once: "He oughtn't to be coming this way. I expect he doesn't know the way round to the back. Poor man, he's very lame. He looks respectable, too." She got up and went toward him, remarking that his face with nice gray moustaches was wonderfully regular, almost like a gentleman's, and that he touched his dusty hat with quite old-fashioned courtesy. And smiling – her smile was sweet but critical – she said: "You'll find the best way is to go back to that little path, and past the greenhouses. Have you hurt your leg?"

"My leg's been like that, m'm, fifteen year come Michaelmas."

"How did it happen?"

"Ploughin'. The bone was injured; an' now they say the muscle's dried up in a manner of speakin'."

"What do you do for it? The very best thing is this."

From the recesses of a deep pocket, placed where no one else wore such a thing, she brought out a little pot.

"You must let me give it you. Put it on when you go to bed, and rub it well in; you'll find it act splendidly."

The old man took the little pot with dubious reverence.

"Yes, m'm," he said; "thank you, m'm."

"What is your name?"

"Gaunt."

"And where do you live?"

"Over to Joyfields, m'm."

"Joyfields – another of my sons lives there – Mr. Morton Freeland. But it's seven miles."

"I got a lift half-way."

"And have you business at the house?" The old man was silent; the downcast, rather cynical look of his lined face deepened. And Frances Freeland thought: 'He's overtired. They must give him some tea and an egg. What can he want, coming all this way? He's evidently not a beggar.'

The old man who was not a beggar spoke suddenly:

"I know the Mr. Freeland at Joyfields. He's a good gentleman, too."

"Yes, he is. I wonder I don't know you."

"I'm not much about, owin' to my leg. It's my grand-daughter in service here, I come to see."

"Oh, yes! What is her name?"

"Gaunt her name is."

"I shouldn't know her by her surname."

"Alice."

"Ah! in the kitchen; a nice, pretty girl. I hope you're not in trouble."

Again the old man was silent, and again spoke suddenly:

"That's as you look at it, m'm," he said. "I've got a matter of a few words to have with her about the family. Her father he couldn't come, so I come instead."

"And how are you going to get back?"

"I'll have to walk, I expect, without I can pick up with a cart."

Frances Freeland compressed her lips. "With that leg you should have come by train."

The old man smiled.

"I hadn't the fare like," he said. "I only gets five shillin's a week, from the council, and two o' that I pays over to my son."

Frances Freeland thrust her hand once more into that deep pocket, and as she did so she noticed that the old man's left boot was flapping open, and that there were two buttons off his coat. Her mind was swiftly calculating: "It is more than seven weeks to quarter day. Of course I can't afford it, but I must just give him a sovereign."

She withdrew her hand from the recesses of her pocket and looked at the old man's nose. It was finely chiselled, and the same yellow as his face. "It looks nice, and quite sober," she thought. In her hand was her purse and a boot-lace. She took out a sovereign.

"Now, if I give you this," she said, "you must promise me not to spend any of it in the public-house. And this is for your boot. And you must go back by train. And get those buttons sewn on your coat. And tell cook, from me, please, to give you some tea and an egg." And noticing that he took the sovereign and the boot-lace very respectfully, and seemed altogether very respectable, and not at all coarse or beery-looking, she said:

"Good-by; don't forget to rub what I gave you into your leg every night and every morning," and went back to her camp-stool. Sitting down on it with the scissors in her hand, she still did not cut out that recipe, but remained as before, taking in small, definite things, and feeling with an inner trembling that dear Felix and Alan and Nedda would soon be here; and the little flush rose again in her cheeks, and again her lips and hands moved, expressing and compressing what was in her heart. And close behind her, a peacock, straying from the foundations of the old Moreton house, uttered a cry, and moved slowly, spreading its tail under the low-hanging boughs of the copper-beeches, as though it knew those dark burnished leaves were the proper setting for its 'parlant' magnificence.

CHAPTER V

The day after the little conference at John's, Felix had indeed received the following note:

"DEAR FELIX:

"When you go down to see old Tod, why not put up with us at Becket? Any time will suit, and the car can take you over to Joyfields when you like. Give the pen a rest. Clara joins in hoping you'll come, and Mother is still here. No use, I suppose, to ask Flora.

"Yours ever,

"STANLEY."

During the twenty years of his brother's sojourn there Felix had been down to Becket perhaps once a year, and latterly alone; for Flora, having accompanied him the first few times, had taken a firm stand.

"My dear," she said, "I feel all body there."

Felix had rejoined:

"No bad thing, once in a way."

But Flora had remained firm. Life was too short! She did not get on well with Clara. Neither did Felix feel too happy in his sister-in-law's presence; but the gray top-hat instinct had kept him going there, for one ought to keep in touch with one's brothers.

He replied to Stanley:

"DEAR STANLEY:

"Delighted; if I may bring my two youngsters. We'll arrive to-morrow at four-fifty.

"Yours affectionately,

"FELIX."

Travelling with Nedda was always jolly; one could watch her eyes noting, inquiring, and when occasion served, have one's little finger hooked in and squeezed. Travelling with Alan was convenient, the young man having a way with railways which Felix himself had long despaired of acquiring. Neither of the children had ever been at Becket, and though Alan was seldom curious, and Nedda too curious about everything to be specially so about this, yet Felix experienced in their company the sensations of a new adventure.

Arrived at Transham, that little town upon a hill which the Morton Plough Works had created, they were soon in Stanley's car, whirling into the sleepy peace of a Worcestershire afternoon. Would this young bird nestling up against him echo Flora's verdict: 'I feel all body there!' or would she take to its fatted luxury as a duck to water? And he said: "By the way, your aunt's 'Bigwigs' set in on a Saturday. Are you for staying and seeing the lions feed, or do we cut back?"

From Alan he got the answer he expected:

"If there's golf or something, I suppose we can make out all right." From Nedda: "What sort of Bigwigs are they, Dad?"

"A sort you've never seen, my dear."

"Then I should like to stay. Only, about dresses?"

"What war paint have you?"

"Only two white evenings. And Mums gave me her Mechlin."

""Twill serve."

To Felix, Nedda in white 'evenings' was starry and all that man could desire.

"Only, Dad, do tell me about them, beforehand."

"My dear, I will. And God be with you. This is where Becket begins."

The car had swerved into a long drive between trees not yet full-grown, but decorously trying to look more than their twenty years. To the right, about a group of older elms, rooks were in commotion, for Stanley's three keepers' wives had just baked their annual rook pies, and the birds were not yet happy again. Those elms had stood there when the old Moretons walked past them through corn-fields to church of a Sunday. Away on the left above the lake, the little walled mound had come in view. Something in Felix always stirred at sight of it, and, squeezing Nedda's arm, he said:

"See that silly wall? Behind there Granny's ancients lived. Gone now – new house – new lake – new trees – new everything."

But he saw from his little daughter's calm eyes that the sentiment in him was not in her.

"I like the lake," she said. "There's Granny – oh, and a peacock!"

His mother's embrace, with its frail energy, and the pressure

of her soft, dry lips, filled Felix always with remorse. Why could he not give the simple and direct expression to his feeling that she gave to hers? He watched those lips transferred to Nedda, heard her say: "Oh, my darling, how lovely to see you! Do you know this for midge-bites?" A hand, diving deep into a pocket, returned with a little silver-coated stick having a bluish end. Felix saw it rise and hover about Nedda's forehead, and descend with two little swift dabs. "It takes them away at once."

"Oh, but Granny, they're not midge-bites; they're only from my hat!"

"It doesn't matter, darling; it takes away anything like that."

And he thought: 'Mother is really wonderful!'

At the house the car had already disgorged their luggage. Only one man, but he absolutely the butler, awaited them, and they entered, at once conscious of Clara's special pot-pourri. Its fragrance steamed from blue china, in every nook and crevice, a sort of baptism into luxury. Clara herself, in the outer morning-room, smelled a little of it. Quick and dark of eye, capable, comely, perfectly buttoned, one of those women who know exactly how not to be superior to the general taste of the period. In addition to that great quality she was endowed with a fine nose, an instinct for co-ordination not to be excelled, and a genuine love of making people comfortable; so that it was no wonder that she had risen in the ranks of hostesses, till her house was celebrated for its ease, even among those who at their week-ends liked to feel 'all body.' In regard to that characteristic of Becket,

not even Felix in his ironies had ever stood up to Clara; the matter was too delicate. Frances Freeland, indeed – not because she had any philosophic preconceptions on the matter, but because it was 'not nice, dear, to be wasteful' even if it were only of rose-leaves, or to 'have too much decoration,' such as Japanese prints in places where they hum – sometimes told her daughter-in-law frankly what was wrong, without, however, making the faintest impression upon Clara, for she was not sensitive, and, as she said to Stanley, it was 'only Mother.'

When they had drunk that special Chinese tea, all the rage, but which no one really liked, in the inner morning, or afternoon room – for the drawing-rooms were too large to be comfortable except at week-ends – they went to see the children, a special blend of Stanley and Clara, save the little Francis, who did not seem to be entirely body. Then Clara took them to their rooms. She lingered kindly in Nedda's, feeling that the girl could not yet feel quite at home, and looking in the soap-dish lest she might not have the right verbena, and about the dressing-table to see that she had pins and scent, and plenty of 'pot-pourri,' and thinking: 'The child is pretty – a nice girl, not like her mother.' Explaining carefully how, because of the approaching week-end, she had been obliged to put her in 'a very simple room' where she would be compelled to cross the corridor to her bath, she asked her if she had a quilted dressing-gown, and finding that she had not, left her saying she would send one – and could she do her frocks up, or should Sirrett come?

Abandoned, the girl stood in the middle of the room, so far more 'simple' than she had ever slept in, with its warm fragrance of rose-leaves and verbena, its Aubusson carpet, white silk-quilted bed, sofa, cushioned window-seat, dainty curtains, and little nickel box of biscuits on little spindly table. There she stood and sniffed, stretched herself, and thought: 'It's jolly – only, it smells too much!' and she went up to the pictures, one by one. They seemed to go splendidly with the room, and suddenly she felt homesick. Ridiculous, of course! Yet, if she had known where her father's room was, she would have run out to it; but her memory was too tangled up with stairs and corridors – to find her way down to the hall again was all she could have done.

A maid came in now with a blue silk gown very thick and soft. Could she do anything for Miss Freeland? No, thanks, she could not; only, did she know where Mr. Freeland's room was?

"Which Mr. Freeland, miss, the young or the old?"

"Oh, the old!" Having said which, Nedda felt unhappy; her Dad was not old! "No, miss; but I'll find out. It'll be in the walnut wing!" But with a little flutter at the thought of thus setting people to run about wings, Nedda murmured: "Oh! thanks, no; it doesn't matter."

She settled down now on the cushion of the window-seat, to look out and take it all in, right away to that line of hills gone blue in the haze of the warm evening. That would be Malvern; and there, farther to the south, the 'Tods' lived. 'Joyfields!' A pretty name! And it was lovely country all round; green and

peaceful, with its white, timbered houses and cottages. People must be very happy, living here – happy and quiet like the stars and the birds; not like the crowds in London thronging streets and shops and Hampstead Heath; not like the people in all those disgruntled suburbs that led out for miles where London ought to have stopped but had not; not like the thousands and thousands of those poor creatures in Bethnal Green, where her slum work lay. The natives here must surely be happy. Only, were there any natives? She had not seen any. Away to the right below her window were the first trees of the fruit garden; for many of them Spring was over, but the apple-trees had just come into blossom, and the low sun shining through a gap in some far elms was slanting on their creamy pink, christening them – Nedda thought – with drops of light; and lovely the blackbirds' singing sounded in the perfect hush! How wonderful to be a bird, going where you would, and from high up in the air seeing everything; flying down a sunbeam, drinking a raindrop, sitting on the very top of a tall tree, running in grass so high that you were hidden, laying little perfect blue-green eggs, or pure-gray speckly ones; never changing your dress, yet always beautiful. Surely the spirit of the world was in the birds and the clouds, roaming, floating, and in the flowers and trees that never smelled anything but sweet, never looked anything but lovely, and were never restless. Why was one restless, wanting things that did not come – wanting to feel and know, wanting to love, and be loved? And at that thought which had come to her so unexpectedly – a thought never before

shaped so definitely – Nedda planted her arms on the window-sill, with sleeves fallen down, and let her hands meet cup-shaped beneath her chin. Love! To have somebody with whom she could share everything – some one to whom and for whom she could give up – some one she could protect and comfort – some one who would bring her peace. Peace, rest – from what? Ah! that she could not make clear, even to herself. Love! What would love be like? Her father loved her, and she loved him. She loved her mother; and Alan on the whole was jolly to her – it was not that. What was it – where was it – when would it come and wake her, and kiss her to sleep, all in one? Come and fill her as with the warmth and color, the freshness, light, and shadow of this beautiful May evening, flood her as with the singing of those birds, and the warm light sunning the apple blossoms. And she sighed. Then – as with all young things whose attention after all is but as the hovering of a butterfly – her speculation was attracted to a thin, high-shouldered figure limping on a stick, away from the house, down one of the paths among the apple-trees. He wavered, not knowing, it seemed, his way. And Nedda thought: 'Poor old man, how lame he is!' She saw him stoop, screened, as he evidently thought, from sight, and take something very small from his pocket. He gazed, rubbed it, put it back; what it was she could not see. Then pressing his hand down, he smoothed and stretched his leg. His eyes seemed closed. So a stone man might have stood! Till very slowly he limped on, passing out of sight. And turning from the window, Nedda began hurrying into her

evening things.

When she was ready she took a long time to decide whether to wear her mother's lace or keep it for the Bigwigs. But it was so nice and creamy that she simply could not take it off, and stood turning and turning before the glass. To stand before a glass was silly and old-fashioned; but Nedda could never help it, wanting so badly to be nicer to look at than she was, because of that something that some day was coming!

She was, in fact, pretty, but not merely pretty – there was in her face something alive and sweet, something clear and swift. She had still that way of a child raising its eyes very quickly and looking straight at you with an eager innocence that hides everything by its very wonder; and when those eyes looked down they seemed closed – their dark lashes were so long. Her eyebrows were wide apart, arching with a slight angle, and slanting a little down toward her nose. Her forehead under its burnt-brown hair was candid; her firm little chin just dimpled. Altogether, a face difficult to take one's eyes off. But Nedda was far from vain, and her face seemed to her too short and broad, her eyes too dark and indeterminate, neither gray nor brown. The straightness of her nose was certainly comforting, but it, too, was short. Being creamy in the throat and browning easily, she would have liked to be marble-white, with blue dreamy eyes and fair hair, or else like a Madonna. And was she tall enough? Only five foot five. And her arms were too thin. The only things that gave her perfect satisfaction were her legs, which, of course, she could

not at the moment see; they really WERE rather jolly! Then, in a panic, fearing to be late, she turned and ran out, fluttering into the maze of stairs and corridors.

CHAPTER VI

Clara, Mrs. Stanley Freeland, was not a narrow woman either in mind or body; and years ago, soon indeed after she married Stanley, she had declared her intention of taking up her sister-in-law, Kirsteen, in spite of what she had heard were the woman's extraordinary notions. Those were the days of carriages, pairs, coachmen, grooms, and, with her usual promptitude, ordering out the lot, she had set forth. It is safe to say she had never forgotten that experience.

Imagine an old, white, timbered cottage with a thatched roof, and no single line about it quite straight. A cottage crazy with age, buried up to the thatch in sweetbrier, creepers, honeysuckle, and perched high above crossroads. A cottage almost unapproachable for beehives and their bees – an insect for which Clara had an aversion. Imagine on the rough, pebbled approach to the door of this cottage (and Clara had on thin shoes) a peculiar cradle with a dark-eyed baby that was staring placidly at two bees sleeping on a coverlet made of a rough linen such as Clara had never before seen. Imagine an absolutely naked little girl of three, sitting in a tub of sunlight in the very doorway. Clara had turned swiftly and closed the wicket gate between the pebbled pathway and the mossed steps that led down to where her coachman and her footman were sitting very still, as was the habit of those people. She had perceived at once that she was making no common call.

Then, with real courage she had advanced, and, looking down at the little girl with a fearful smile, had tickled the door with the handle of her green parasol. A woman younger than herself, a girl, indeed, appeared in a low doorway. She had often told Stanley since that she would never forget her first sight (she had not yet had another) of Tod's wife. A brown face and black hair, fiery gray eyes, eyes all light, under black lashes, and "such a strange smile;" bare, brown, shapely arms and neck in a shirt of the same rough, creamy linen, and, from under a bright blue skirt, bare, brown, shapely ankles and feet! A voice so soft and deadly that, as Clara said: "What with her eyes, it really gave me the shivers. And, my dear," she had pursued, "white-washed walls, bare brick floors, not a picture, not a curtain, not even a fire-iron. Clean – oh, horribly! They must be the most awful cranks. The only thing I must say that was nice was the smell. Sweetbrier, and honey, coffee, and baked apples – really delicious. I must try what I can do with it. But that woman – girl, I suppose she is – stumped me. I'm sure she'd have cut my head off if I'd attempted to open my mouth on ordinary topics. The children were rather ducks; but imagine leaving them about like that amongst the bees. 'Kirsteen!' She looked it. Never again! And Tod I didn't see at all; I suppose he was mooning about amongst his creatures."

It was the memory of this visit, now seventeen years ago, that had made her smile so indulgently when Stanley came back from the conference. She had said at once that they must have Felix to stay, and for her part she would be only too glad to do anything

she could for those poor children of Tod's, even to asking them to Becket, and trying to civilize them a little… "But as for that woman, there'll be nothing to be done with her, I can assure you. And I expect Tod is completely under her thumb."

To Felix, who took her in to dinner, she spoke feelingly and in a low voice. She liked Felix, in spite of his wife, and respected him – he had a name. Lady Malloring – she told him – the Mallorings owned, of course, everything round Joyfields – had been telling her that of late Tod's wife had really become quite rabid over the land question. 'The Tods' were hand in glove with all the cottagers. She, Clara, had nothing to say against any one who sympathized with the condition of the agricultural laborer; quite the contrary. Becket was almost, as Felix knew – though perhaps it wasn't for her to say so – the centre of that movement; but there were ways of doing things, and one did so deprecate women like this Kirsteen – what an impossibly Celtic name! – putting her finger into any pie that really was of national importance. Nothing could come of anything done that sort of way. If Felix had any influence with Tod it would be a mercy to use it in getting those poor young creatures away from home, to mix a little with people who took a sane view of things. She would like very much to get them over to Becket, but with their notions it was doubtful whether they had evening clothes! She had, of course, never forgotten that naked mite in the tub of sunlight, nor the poor baby with its bees and its rough linen. Felix replied deferentially – he was invariably polite, and only

just ironic enough, in the houses of others – that he had the very greatest respect for Tod, and that there could be nothing very wrong with the woman to whom Tod was so devoted. As for the children, his own young people would get at them and learn all about what was going on in a way that no fogey like himself could. In regard to the land question, there were, of course, many sides to that, and he, for one, would not be at all sorry to observe yet another. After all, the Tods were in real contact with the laborers, and that was the great thing. It would be very interesting.

Yes, Clara quite saw all that, but – and here she sank her voice so that there was hardly any left – as Felix was going over there, she really must put him au courant with the heart of this matter. Lady Malloring had told her the whole story. It appeared there were two cases: A family called Gaunt, an old man, and his son, who had two daughters – one of them, Alice, quite a nice girl, was kitchen-maid here at Becket, but the other sister – Wilmet – well! she was one of those girls that, as Felix must know, were always to be found in every village. She was leading the young men astray, and Lady Malloring had put her foot down, telling her bailiff to tell the farmer for whom Gaunt worked that he and his family must go, unless they sent the girl away somewhere. That was one case. And the other was of a laborer called Tryst, who wanted to marry his deceased wife's sister. Of course, whether Mildred Malloring was not rather too churchy and puritanical – now that a deceased wife's sister was legal – Clara did not want to

say; but she was undoubtedly within her rights if she thought it for the good of the village. This man, Tryst, was a good workman, and his farmer had objected to losing him, but Lady Malloring had, of course, not given way, and if he persisted he would get put out. All the cottages about there were Sir Gerald Malloring's, so that in both cases it would mean leaving the neighborhood. In regard to village morality, as Felix knew, the line must be drawn somewhere.

Felix interrupted quietly:

"I draw it at Lady Malloring."

"Well, I won't argue that with you. But it really is a scandal that Tod's wife should incite her young people to stir up the villagers. Goodness knows where that mayn't lead! Tod's cottage and land, you see, are freehold, the only freehold thereabouts; and his being a brother of Stanley's makes it particularly awkward for the Mallorings."

"Quite so!" murmured Felix.

"Yes, but my dear Felix, when it comes to infecting those simple people with inflated ideas of their rights, it's serious, especially in the country. I'm told there's really quite a violent feeling. I hear from Alice Gaunt that the young Tods have been going about saying that dogs are better off than people treated in this fashion, which, of course, is all nonsense, and making far too much of a small matter. Don't you think so?"

But Felix only smiled his peculiar, sweetish smile, and answered:

"I'm glad to have come down just now."

Clara, who did not know that when Felix smiled like that he was angry, agreed.

"Yes," she said; "you're an observer. You will see the thing in right perspective."

"I shall endeavor to. What does Tod say?"

"Oh! Tod never seems to say anything. At least, I never hear of it."

Felix murmured:

"Tod is a well in the desert."

To which deep saying Clara made no reply, not indeed understanding in the least what it might signify.

That evening, when Alan, having had his fill of billiards, had left the smoking-room and gone to bed, Felix remarked to Stanley:

"I say, what sort of people are these Mallorings?"

Stanley, who was settling himself for the twenty minutes of whiskey, potash, and a Review, with which he commonly composed his mind before retiring, answered negligently:

"The Mallorings? Oh! about the best type of landowner we've got."

"What exactly do you mean by that?"

Stanley took his time to answer, for below his bluff good-nature he had the tenacious, if somewhat slow, precision of an English man of business, mingled with a certain mistrust of 'old Felix.'

"Well," he said at last, "they build good cottages, yellow brick, d – d ugly, I must say; look after the character of their tenants; give 'em rebate of rent if there's a bad harvest; encourage stock-breedin', and machinery – they've got some of my ploughs, but the people don't like 'em, and, as a matter of fact, they're right – they're not made for these small fields; set an example goin' to church; patronize the Rifle Range; buy up the pubs when they can, and run 'em themselves; send out jelly, and let people over their place on bank holidays. Dash it all, I don't know what they don't do. Why?"

"Are they liked?"

"Liked? No, I should hardly think they were liked; respected, and all that. Malloring's a steady fellow, keen man on housing, and a gentleman; she's a bit too much perhaps on the pious side. They've got one of the finest Georgian houses in the country. Altogether they're what you call 'model.'"

"But not human."

Stanley slightly lowered the Review and looked across it at his brother. It was evident to him that 'old Felix' was in one of his free-thinking moods.

"They're domestic," he said, "and fond of their children, and pleasant neighbors. I don't deny that they've got a tremendous sense of duty, but we want that in these days."

"Duty to what?"

Stanley raised his level eyebrows. It was a stumper. Without great care he felt that he would be getting over the border into

the uncharted land of speculation and philosophy, wandering on paths that led him nowhere.

"If you lived in the country, old man," he said, "you wouldn't ask that sort of question."

"You don't imagine," said Felix, "that you or the Mallorings live in the country? Why, you landlords are every bit as much town dwellers as I am – thought, habit, dress, faith, souls, all town stuff. There IS no 'country' in England now for us of the 'upper classes.' It's gone. I repeat: Duty to what?"

And, rising, he went over to the window, looking out at the moonlit lawn, overcome by a sudden aversion from more talk. Of what use were words from a mind tuned in one key to a mind tuned in another? And yet, so ingrained was his habit of discussion, that he promptly went on:

"The Mallorings, I've not the slightest doubt, believe it their duty to look after the morals of those who live on their property. There are three things to be said about that: One – you can't make people moral by adopting the attitude of the schoolmaster. Two – it implies that they consider themselves more moral than their neighbors. Three – it's a theory so convenient to their security that they would be exceptionally good people if they did not adopt it; but, from your account, they are not so much exceptionally as just typically good people. What you call their sense of duty, Stanley, is really their sense of self-preservation coupled with their sense of superiority."

"H'm!" said Stanley; "I don't know that I quite follow you."

"I always hate an odor of sanctity. I'd prefer them to say frankly: 'This is my property, and you'll jolly well do what I tell you, on it.'"

"But, my dear chap, after all, they really ARE superior."

"That," said Felix, "I emphatically question. Put your Mallorings to earn their living on fifteen to eighteen shillings a week, and where would they be? The Mallorings have certain virtues, no doubt, natural to their fortunate environment, but of the primitive virtues of patience, hardihood, perpetual, almost unconscious self-sacrifice, and cheerfulness in the face of a hard fate, they are no more the equals of the people they pretend to be superior to than I am your equal as a man of business."

"Hang it!" was Stanley's answer, "what a d – d old heretic you are!"

Felix frowned. "Am I? Be honest! Take the life of a Malloring and take it at its best; see how it stands comparison in the ordinary virtues with those of an averagely good specimen of a farm-laborer. Your Malloring is called with a cup of tea, at, say, seven o'clock, out of a nice, clean, warm bed; he gets into a bath that has been got ready for him; into clothes and boots that have been brushed for him; and goes down to a room where there's a fire burning already if it's a cold day, writes a few letters, perhaps, before eating a breakfast of exactly what he likes, nicely prepared for him, and reading the newspaper that best comforts his soul; when he has eaten and read, he lights his cigar or his pipe and attends to his digestion in the most sanitary and comfortable

fashion; then in his study he sits down to steady direction of other people, either by interview or by writing letters, or what not. In this way, between directing people and eating what he likes, he passes the whole day, except that for two or three hours, sometimes indeed seven or eight hours, he attends to his physique by riding, motoring, playing a game, or indulging in a sport that he has chosen for himself. And, at the end of all that, he probably has another bath that has been made ready for him, puts on clean clothes that have been put out for him, goes down to a good dinner that has been cooked for him, smokes, reads, learns, and inwardly digests, or else plays cards, billiards, and acts host till he is sleepy, and so to bed, in a clean, warm bed, in a clean, fresh room. Is that exaggerated?"

"No; but when you talk of his directing other people, you forget that he is doing what they couldn't."

"He may be doing what they couldn't; but ordinary directive ability is not born in a man; it's acquired by habit and training. Suppose fortune had reversed them at birth, the Gaunt or Tryst would by now have it and the Malloring would not. The accident that they were not reversed at birth has given the Malloring a thousandfold advantage."

"It's no joke directing things," muttered Stanley.

"No work is any joke; but I just put it to you: Simply as work, without taking in the question of reward, would you dream for a minute of swapping your work with the work of one of your workmen? No. Well, neither would a Malloring with one of his

Gaunts. So that, my boy, for work which is intrinsically more interesting and pleasurable, the Malloring gets a hundred to a thousand times more money."

"All this is rank socialism, my dear fellow."

"No; rank truth. Now, to take the life of a Gaunt. He gets up summer and winter much earlier out of a bed that he cannot afford time or money to keep too clean or warm, in a small room that probably has not a large enough window; into clothes stiff with work and boots stiff with clay; makes something hot for himself, very likely brings some of it to his wife and children; goes out, attending to his digestion crudely and without comfort; works with his hands and feet from half past six or seven in the morning till past five at night, except that twice he stops for an hour or so and eats simple things that he would not altogether have chosen to eat if he could have had his will. He goes home to a tea that has been got ready for him, and has a clean-up without assistance, smokes a pipe of shag, reads a newspaper perhaps two days old, and goes out again to work for his own good, in his vegetable patch, or to sit on a wooden bench in an atmosphere of beer and 'baccy.' And so, dead tired, but not from directing other people, he drowses himself to early lying again in his doubtful bed. Is that exaggerated?"

"I suppose not, but he – "

"Has his compensations: Clean conscience – freedom from worry – fresh air, all the rest of it! I know. Clean conscience granted, but so has your Malloring, it would seem. Freedom from

worry – yes, except when a pair of boots is wanted, or one of the children is ill; then he has to make up for lost time with a vengeance. Fresh air – and wet clothes, with a good chance of premature rheumatism. Candidly, which of those two lives demands more of the virtues on which human life is founded – courage and patience, hardihood and self-sacrifice? And which of two men who have lived those two lives well has most right to the word 'superior'?"

Stanley dropped the Review and for fully a minute paced the room without reply. Then he said:

"Felix, you're talking flat revolution."

Felix, who, faintly smiling, had watched him up and down, up and down the Turkey carpet, answered:

"Not so. I am by no means a revolutionary person, because with all the good-will in the world I have been unable to see how upheavals from the bottom, or violence of any sort, is going to equalize these lives or do any good. But I detest humbug, and I believe that so long as you and your Mallorings go on blindly dosing yourselves with humbug about duty and superiority, so long will you see things as they are not. And until you see things as they are, purged of all that sickening cant, you will none of you really move to make the conditions of life more and ever more just. For, mark you, Stanley, I, who do not believe in revolution from the bottom, the more believe that it is up to us in honour to revolutionize things from the top!"

"H'm!" said Stanley; "that's all very well; but the more you

give the more they want, till there's no end to it."

Felix stared round that room, where indeed one was all body.

"By George," he said, "I've yet to see a beginning. But, anyway, if you give in a grudging spirit, or the spirit of a schoolmaster, what can you expect? If you offer out of real good-will, so it is taken." And suddenly conscious that he had uttered a constructive phrase, Felix cast down his eyes, and added:

"I am going to my clean, warm bed. Good night, old man!"

When his brother had taken up his candlestick and gone, Stanley, uttering a dubious sound, sat down on the lounge, drank deep out of his tumbler, and once more took up his Review.

CHAPTER VII

The next day Stanley's car, fraught with Felix and a note from Clara, moved swiftly along the grass-bordered roads toward Joyfields. Lying back on the cushioned seat, the warm air flying at his face, Felix contemplated with delight his favorite countryside. Certainly this garden of England was very lovely, its greenness, trees, and large, pied, lazy cattle; its very emptiness of human beings even was pleasing.

Nearing Joyfields he noted the Mallorings' park and their long Georgian house, carefully fronting south. There, too, was the pond of what village there was, with the usual ducks on it; and three well-remembered cottages in a row, neat and trim, of the old, thatched sort, but evidently restored. Out of the door of one of them two young people had just emerged, going in the same direction as the car. Felix passed them and turned to look. Yes, it was they! He stopped the car. They were walking, with eyes straight before them, frowning. And Felix thought: 'Nothing of Tod in either of them; regular Celts!'

The girl's vivid, open face, crisp, brown, untidy hair, cheeks brimful of color, thick lips, eyes that looked up and out as a Skye terrier's eyes look out of its shagginess – indeed, her whole figure struck Felix as almost frighteningly vital; and she walked as if she despised the ground she covered. The boy was even more arresting. What a strange, pale-dark face, with its

black, uncovered hair, its straight black brows; what a proud, swan's-eyed, thin-lipped, straight-nosed young devil, marching like a very Highlander; though still rather run-up, from sheer youthfulness! They had come abreast of the car by now, and, leaning out, he said:

"You don't remember me, I'm afraid!" The boy shook his head. Wonderful eyes he had! But the girl put out her hand.

"Of course, Derek; it's Uncle Felix."

They both smiled now, the girl friendly, the boy rather drawn back into himself. And feeling strangely small and ill at ease, Felix murmured:

"I'm going to see your father. Can I give you a lift home?"

The answer came as he expected:

"No, thanks." Then, as if to tone it down, the girl added:

"We've got something to do first. You'll find him in the orchard."

She had a ringing voice, full of warmth. Lifting his hat, Felix passed on. They WERE a couple! Strange, attractive, almost frightening. Kirsteen had brought his brother a formidable little brood.

Arriving at the cottage, he went up its mossy stones and through the wicket gate. There was little change, indeed, since the days of Clara's visit, save that the beehives had been moved farther out. Nor did any one answer his knock; and mindful of the girl's words, "You'll find him in the orchard," he made his way out among the trees. The grass was long and starred

with petals. Felix wandered over it among bees busy with the apple-blossom. At the very end he came on his brother, cutting down a pear-tree. Tod was in shirt-sleeves, his brown arms bare almost to the shoulders. How tremendous the fellow was! What resounding and terrific blows he was dealing! Down came the tree, and Tod drew his arm across his brow. This great, burnt, curly-headed fellow was more splendid to look upon than even Felix had remembered, and so well built that not a movement of his limbs was heavy. His cheek-bones were very broad and high; his brows thick and rather darker than his bright hair, so that his deep-set, very blue eyes seemed to look out of a thicket; his level white teeth gleamed from under his tawny moustache, and his brown, unshaven cheeks and jaw seemed covered with gold powder. Catching sight of Felix, he came forward.

"Fancy," he said, "old Gladstone spending his leisure cutting down trees – of all melancholy jobs!"

Felix did not quite know what to answer, so he put his arm within his brother's. Tod drew him toward the tree.

"Sit down!" he said. Then, looking sorrowfully at the pear-tree, he murmured:

"Seventy years – and down in seven minutes. Now we shall burn it. Well, it had to go. This is the third year it's had no blossom."

His speech was slow, like that of a man accustomed to think aloud. Felix admired him askance. "I might live next door," he thought, "for all the notice he's taken of my turning up!"

"I came over in Stanley's car," he said. "Met your two coming along – fine couple they are!"

"Ah!" said Tod. And there was something in the way he said it that was more than a mere declaration of pride or of affection. Then he looked at Felix.

"What have you come for, old man?"

Felix smiled. Quaint way to put it!

"For a talk."

"Ah!" said Tod, and he whistled.

A largish, well-made dog with a sleek black coat, white underneath, and a black tail white-tipped, came running up, and stood before Tod, with its head rather to one side and its yellow-brown eyes saying: 'I simply must get at what you're thinking, you know.'

"Go and tell your mistress to come – Mistress!"

The dog moved his tail, lowered it, and went off.

"A gypsy gave him to me," said Tod; "best dog that ever lived."

"Every one thinks that of his own dog, old man."

"Yes," said Tod; "but this IS."

"He looks intelligent."

"He's got a soul," said Tod. "The gypsy said he didn't steal him, but he did."

"Do you always know when people aren't speaking the truth, then?"

"Yes."

At such a monstrous remark from any other man, Felix would

have smiled; but seeing it was Tod, he only asked: "How?"

"People who aren't speaking the truth look you in the face and never move their eyes."

"Some people do that when they are speaking the truth."

"Yes; but when they aren't, you can see them struggling to keep their eyes straight. A dog avoids your eye when he's something to conceal; a man stares at you. Listen!"

Felix listened and heard nothing.

"A wren;" and, screwing up his lips, Tod emitted a sound: "Look!"

Felix saw on the branch of an apple-tree a tiny brown bird with a little beak sticking out and a little tail sticking up. And he thought: 'Tod's hopeless!'

"That fellow," said Tod softly, "has got his nest there just behind us." Again he emitted the sound. Felix saw the little bird move its head with a sort of infinite curiosity, and hop twice on the branch.

"I can't get the hen to do that," Tod murmured.

Felix put his hand on his brother's arm – what an arm!

"Yes," he said; "but look here, old man – I really want to talk to you."

Tod shook his head. "Wait for her," he said.

Felix waited. Tod was getting awfully eccentric, living this queer, out-of-the-way life with a cranky woman year after year; never reading anything, never seeing any one but tramps and animals and villagers. And yet, sitting there beside his eccentric

brother on that fallen tree, he had an extraordinary sense of rest. It was, perhaps, but the beauty and sweetness of the day with its dappling sunlight brightening the apple-blossoms, the wind-flowers, the wood-sorrel, and in the blue sky above the fields those clouds so unimaginably white. All the tiny noises of the orchard, too, struck on his ear with a peculiar meaning, a strange fulness, as if he had never heard such sounds before. Tod, who was looking at the sky, said suddenly:

"Are you hungry?"

And Felix remembered that they never had any proper meals, but, when hungry, went to the kitchen, where a wood-fire was always burning, and either heated up coffee, and porridge that was already made, with boiled eggs and baked potatoes and apples, or devoured bread, cheese, jam, honey, cream, tomatoes, butter, nuts, and fruit, that were always set out there on a wooden table, under a muslin awning; he remembered, too, that they washed up their own bowls and spoons and plates, and, having finished, went outside and drew themselves a draught of water. Queer life, and deuced uncomfortable – almost Chinese in its reversal of everything that every one else was doing.

"No," he said, "I'm not."

"I am. Here she is."

Felix felt his heart beating – Clara was not alone in being frightened of this woman. She was coming through the orchard with the dog; a remarkable-looking woman – oh, certainly remarkable! She greeted him without surprise and, sitting down

close to Tod, said: "I'm glad to see you."

Why did this family somehow make him feel inferior? The way she sat there and looked at him so calmly! Still more the way she narrowed her eyes and wrinkled her lips, as if rather malicious thoughts were rising in her soul! Her hair, as is the way of fine, soft, almost indigo-colored hair, was already showing threads of silver; her whole face and figure thinner than he had remembered. But a striking woman still – with wonderful eyes! Her dress – Felix had scanned many a crank in his day – was not so alarming as it had once seemed to Clara; its coarse-woven, deep-blue linen and needle-worked yoke were pleasing to him, and he could hardly take his gaze from the kingfisher-blue band or fillet that she wore round that silver-threaded black hair.

He began by giving her Clara's note, the wording of which he had himself dictated:

"DEAR KIRSTEEN:

"Though we have not seen each other for so long, I am sure you will forgive my writing. It would give us so much pleasure if you and the two children would come over for a night or two while Felix and his young folk are staying with us. It is no use, I fear, to ask Tod; but of course if he would come, too, both Stanley and myself would be delighted.

"Yours cordially,

"CLARA FREELAND."

She read it, handed it to Tod, who also read it and handed it to Felix. Nobody said anything. It was so altogether simple

and friendly a note that Felix felt pleased with it, thinking: 'I expressed that well!'

Then Tod said: "Go ahead, old man! You've got something to say about the youngsters, haven't you?"

How on earth did he know that? But then Tod HAD a sort of queer prescience.

"Well," he brought out with an effort, "don't you think it's a pity to embroil your young people in village troubles? We've been hearing from Stanley – "

Kirsteen interrupted in her calm, staccato voice with just the faintest lisp:

"Stanley would not understand."

She had put her arm through Tod's, but never removed her eyes from her brother-in-law's face.

"Possibly," said Felix, "but you must remember that Stanley, John, and myself represent ordinary – what shall we say – level-headed opinion."

"With which we have nothing in common, I'm afraid."

Felix glanced from her to Tod. The fellow had his head on one side and seemed listening to something in the distance. And Felix felt a certain irritation.

"It's all very well," he said, "but I think you really have got to look at your children's future from a larger point of view. You don't surely want them to fly out against things before they've had a chance to see life for themselves."

She answered:

"The children know more of life than most young people. They've seen it close to, they've seen its realities. They know what the tyranny of the countryside means."

"Yes, yes," said Felix, "but youth is youth."

"They are not too young to know and feel the truth."

Felix was impressed. How those narrowing eyes shone! What conviction in that faintly lisping voice!

'I am a fool for my pains,' he thought, and only said:

"Well, what about this invitation, anyway?"

"Yes; it will be just the thing for them at the moment."

The words had to Felix a somewhat sinister import. He knew well enough that she did not mean by them what others would have meant. But he said: "When shall we expect them? Tuesday, I suppose, would be best for Clara, after her weekend. Is there no chance of you and Tod?"

She quaintly wrinkled her lips into not quite a smile, and answered:

"Tod shall say. Do you hear, Tod?"

"In the meadow. It was there yesterday – first time this year."

Felix slipped his arm through his brother's.

"Quite so, old man."

"What?" said Tod. "Ah! let's go in. I'm awfully hungry…"

Sometimes out of a calm sky a few drops fall, the twigs rustle, and far away is heard the muttering of thunder; the traveller thinks: 'A storm somewhere about.' Then all once more is so quiet and peaceful that he forgets he ever had that thought, and

goes on his way careless.

So with Felix returning to Becket in Stanley's car. That woman's face, those two young heathens – the unconscious Tod!

There was mischief in the air above that little household. But once more the smooth gliding of the cushioned car, the soft peace of the meadows so permanently at grass, the churches, mansions, cottages embowered among their elms, the slow-flapping flight of the rooks and crows lulled Felix to quietude, and the faint far muttering of that thunder died away.

Nedda was in the drive when he returned, gazing at a nymph set up there by Clara. It was a good thing, procured from Berlin, well known for sculpture, and beginning to green over already, as though it had been there a long time – a pretty creature with shoulders drooping, eyes modestly cast down, and a sparrow perching on her head.

"Well, Dad?"

"They're coming."

"When?"

"On Tuesday – the youngsters, only."

"You might tell me a little about them."

But Felix only smiled. His powers of description faltered before that task; and, proud of those powers, he did not choose to subject them to failure.

CHAPTER VIII

Not till three o'clock that Saturday did the Bigwigs begin to come. Lord and Lady Britto first from Erne by car; then Sir Gerald and Lady Malloring, also by car from Joyfields; an early afternoon train brought three members of the Lower House, who liked a round of golf – Colonel Martlett, Mr. Sleesor, and Sir John Fanfar – with their wives; also Miss Bawtrey, an American who went everywhere; and Moorsome, the landscape-painter, a short, very heavy man who went nowhere, and that in almost perfect silence, which he afterward avenged. By a train almost sure to bring no one else came Literature in Public Affairs, alone, Henry Wiltram, whom some believed to have been the very first to have ideas about the land. He was followed in the last possible train by Cuthcott, the advanced editor, in his habitual hurry, and Lady Maude Ughtred in her beauty. Clara was pleased, and said to Stanley, while dressing, that almost every shade of opinion about the land was represented this week-end. She was not, she said, afraid of anything, if she could keep Henry Wiltram and Cuthcott apart. The House of Commons men would, of course, be all right. Stanley assented: "They'll be 'fed up' with talk. But how about Britto – he can sometimes be very nasty, and Cuthcott's been pretty rough on him, in his rag."

Clara had remembered that, and she was putting Lady Maude on one side of Cuthcott, and Moorsome on the other, so that he

would be quite safe at dinner, and afterward – Stanley must look out!

"What have you done with Nedda?" Stanley asked.

"Given her to Colonel Martlett, with Sir John Fanfar on the other side; they both like something fresh." She hoped, however, to foster a discussion, so that they might really get further this week-end; the opportunity was too good to throw away.

"H'm!" Stanley murmured. "Felix said some very queer things the other night. He, too, might make ructions."

Oh, no! – Clara persisted – Felix had too much good taste. She thought that something might be coming out of this occasion, something as it were national, that would bear fruit. And watching Stanley buttoning his braces, she grew enthusiastic. For, think how splendidly everything was represented! Britto, with his view that the thing had gone too far, and all the little efforts we might make now were no good, with Canada and those great spaces to outbid anything we could do; though she could not admit that he was right, there was a lot in what he said; he had great gifts – and some day might – who knew? Then there was Sir John – Clara pursued – who was almost the father of the new Tory policy: Assist the farmers to buy their own land. And Colonel Martlett, representing the older Tory policy of: What the devil would happen to the landowners if they did? Secretly (Clara felt sure) he would never go into a lobby to support that. He had said to her: 'Look at my brother James's property; if we bring this policy in, and the farmers take advantage, his house

might stand there any day without an acre round it.' Quite true – it might. The same might even happen to Becket.

Stanley grunted.

Exactly! – Clara went on: And that was the beauty of having got the Mallorings; theirs was such a steady point of view, and she was not sure that they weren't right, and the whole thing really a question of model proprietorship.

"H'm!" Stanley muttered. "Felix will have his knife into that."

Clara did not think that mattered. The thing was to get everybody's opinion. Even Mr. Moorsome's would be valuable – if he weren't so terrifically silent, for he must think a lot, sitting all day, as he did, painting the land.

"He's a heavy ass," said Stanley.

Yes; but Clara did not wish to be narrow. That was why it was so splendid to have got Mr. Sleesor. If anybody knew the Radical mind he did, and he could give full force to what one always felt was at the bottom of it – that the Radicals' real supporters were the urban classes; so that their policy must not go too far with 'the Land,' for fear of seeming to neglect the towns. For, after all, in the end it was out of the pockets of the towns that 'the Land' would have to be financed, and nobody really could expect the towns to get anything out of it. Stanley paused in the adjustment of his tie; his wife was a shrewd woman.

"You've hit it there," he said. "Wiltram will give it him hot on that, though."

Of course, Clara assented. And it was magnificent that they

had got Henry Wiltram, with his idealism and his really heavy corn tax; not caring what happened to the stunted products of the towns – and they truly were stunted, for all that the Radicals and the half-penny press said – till at all costs we could grow our own food. There was a lot in that.

"Yes," Stanley muttered, "and if he gets on to it, shan't I have a jolly time of it in the smoking-room? I know what Cuthcott's like with his shirt out."

Clara's eyes brightened; she was very curious herself to see Mr. Cuthcott with his – that is, to hear him expound the doctrine he was always writing up, namely, that 'the Land' was gone and, short of revolution, there was nothing for it but garden cities. She had heard he was so cutting and ferocious that he really did seem as if he hated his opponents. She hoped he would get a chance – perhaps Felix could encourage him.

"What about the women?" Stanley asked suddenly. "Will they stand a political powwow? One must think of them a bit."

Clara had. She was taking a farewell look at herself in the far-away mirror through the door into her bedroom. It was a mistake – she added – to suppose that women were not interested in 'the Land.' Lady Britto was most intelligent, and Mildred Malloring knew every cottage on her estate.

"Pokes her nose into 'em often enough," Stanley muttered.

Lady Fanfar again, and Mrs. Sleesor, and even Hilda Martlett, were interested in their husbands, and Miss Bawtrey, of course, interested in everything. As for Maude Ughtred, all talk would

be the same to her; she was always week-ending. Stanley need not worry – it would be all right; some real work would get done, some real advance be made. So saying, she turned her fine shoulders twice, once this way and once that, and went out. She had never told even Stanley her ambition that at Becket, under her aegis, should be laid the foundation-stone of the real scheme, whatever it might be, that should regenerate 'the Land.' Stanley would only have laughed; even though it would be bound to make him Lord Freeland when it came to be known some day…

To the eyes and ears of Nedda that evening at dinner, all was new indeed, and all wonderful. It was not that she was unaccustomed to society or to conversation, for to their house at Hampstead many people came, uttering many words, but both the people and the words were so very different. After the first blush, the first reconnaissance of the two Bigwigs between whom she sat, her eyes WOULD stray and her ears would only half listen to them. Indeed, half her ears, she soon found out, were quite enough to deal with Colonel Martlett and Sir John Fanfar. Across the azaleas she let her glance come now and again to anchor on her father's face, and exchanged with him a most enjoyable blink. She tried once or twice to get through to Alan, but he was always eating; he looked very like a young Uncle Stanley this evening.

What was she feeling? Short, quick stabs of self-consciousness as to how she was looking; a sort of stunned excitement due to sheer noise and the number of things offered to her to eat and

drink; keen pleasure in the consciousness that Colonel Martlett and Sir John Fanfar and other men, especially that nice one with the straggly moustache who looked as if he were going to bite, glanced at her when they saw she wasn't looking. If only she had been quite certain that it was not because they thought her too young to be there! She felt a sort of continual exhilaration, that this was the great world – the world where important things were said and done, together with an intense listening expectancy, and a sense most unexpected and almost frightening, that nothing important was being said or would be done. But this she knew to be impudent. On Sunday evenings at home people talked about a future existence, about Nietzsche, Tolstoy, Chinese pictures, post-impressionism, and would suddenly grow hot and furious about peace, and Strauss, justice, marriage, and De Maupassant, and whether people were losing their souls through materialism, and sometimes one of them would get up and walk about the room. But to-night the only words she could catch were the names of two politicians whom nobody seemed to approve of, except that nice one who was going to bite. Once very timidly she asked Colonel Martlett whether he liked Strauss, and was puzzled by his answer: "Rather; those 'Tales of Hoffmann' are rippin', don't you think? You go to the opera much?" She could not, of course, know that the thought which instantly rose within her was doing the governing classes a grave injustice – almost all of whom save Colonel Martlett knew that the 'Tales of Hoffmann' were by one Offenbach. But beyond all things she felt she would

never, never learn to talk as they were all talking – so quickly, so continuously, so without caring whether everybody or only the person they were talking to heard what they said. She had always felt that what you said was only meant for the person you said it to, but here in the great world she must evidently not say anything that was not meant for everybody, and she felt terribly that she could not think of anything of that sort to say. And suddenly she began to want to be alone. That, however, was surely wicked and wasteful, when she ought to be learning such a tremendous lot; and yet, what was there to learn? And listening just sufficiently to Colonel Martlett, who was telling her how great a man he thought a certain general, she looked almost despairingly at the one who was going to bite. He was quite silent at that moment, gazing at his plate, which was strangely empty. And Nedda thought: 'He has jolly wrinkles about his eyes, only they might be heart disease; and I like the color of his face, so nice and yellow, only that might be liver. But I DO like him – I wish I'd been sitting next to him; he looks real.' From that thought, of the reality of a man whose name she did not know, she passed suddenly into the feeling that nothing else of this about her was real at all, neither the talk nor the faces, not even the things she was eating. It was all a queer, buzzing dream. Nor did that sensation of unreality cease when her aunt began collecting her gloves, and they trooped forth to the drawing-room. There, seated between Mrs. Sleesor and Lady Britto, with Lady Malloring opposite, and Miss Bawtrey leaning over the piano toward them, she pinched herself to get

rid of the feeling that, when all these were out of sight of each other, they would become silent and have on their lips a little, bitter smile. Would it be like that up in their bedrooms, or would it only be on her (Nedda's) own lips that this little smile would come? It was a question she could not answer; nor could she very well ask it of any of these ladies. She looked them over as they sat there talking and felt very lonely. And suddenly her eyes fell on her grandmother. Frances Freeland was seated halfway down the long room in a sandalwood chair, somewhat insulated by a surrounding sea of polished floor. She sat with a smile on her lips, quite still, save for the continual movement of her white hands on her black lap. To her gray hair some lace of Chantilly was pinned with a little diamond brooch, and hung behind her delicate but rather long ears. And from her shoulders was depended a silvery garment, of stuff that looked like the mail shirt of a fairy, reaching the ground on either side. A tacit agreement had evidently been come to, that she was incapable of discussing 'the Land' or those other subjects such as the French murder, the Russian opera, the Chinese pictures, and the doings of one, L – , whose fate was just then in the air, so that she sat alone.

And Nedda thought: 'How much more of a lady she looks than anybody here! There's something deep in her to rest on that isn't in the Bigwigs; perhaps it's because she's of a different generation.' And, getting up, she went over and sat down beside her on a little chair.

Frances Freeland rose at once and said:

"Now, my darling, you can't be comfortable in that tiny chair. You must take mine."

"Oh, no, Granny; please!"

"Oh, yes; but you must! It's so comfortable, and I've simply been longing to sit in the chair you're in. Now, darling, to please me!"

Seeing that a prolonged struggle would follow if she did not get up, Nedda rose and changed chairs.

"Do you like these week-ends, Granny?"

Frances Freeland seemed to draw her smile more resolutely across her face. With her perfect articulation, in which there was, however, no trace of bigwiggery, she answered:

"I think they're most interesting, darling. It's so nice to see new people. Of course you don't get to know them, but it's very amusing to watch, especially the head-dresses!" And sinking her voice: "Just look at that one with the feather going straight up; did you ever see such a guy?" and she cackled with a very gentle archness. Gazing at that almost priceless feather, trying to reach God, Nedda felt suddenly how completely she was in her grandmother's little camp; how entirely she disliked bigwiggery.

Frances Freeland's voice brought her round.

"Do you know, darling, I've found the most splendid thing for eyebrows? You just put a little on every night and it keeps them in perfect order. I must give you my little pot."

"I don't like grease, Granny."

"Oh! but this isn't grease, darling. It's a special thing; and you only put on just the tiniest touch."

Diving suddenly into the recesses of something, she produced an exiguous round silver box. Prizing it open, she looked over her shoulder at the Bigwigs, then placed her little finger on the contents of the little box, and said very softly:

"You just take the merest touch, and you put it on like that, and it keeps them together beautifully. Let me! Nobody'll see!"

Quite well understanding that this was all part of her grandmother's passion for putting the best face upon things, and having no belief in her eyebrows, Nedda bent forward; but in a sudden flutter of fear lest the Bigwigs might observe the operation, she drew back, murmuring: "Oh, Granny, darling! Not just now!"

At that moment the men came in, and, under cover of the necessary confusion, she slipped away into the window.

It was pitch-black outside, with the moon not yet up. The bloomy, peaceful dark out there! Wistaria and early roses, clustering in, had but the ghost of color on their blossoms. Nedda took a rose in her fingers, feeling with delight its soft fragility, its coolness against her hot palm. Here in her hand was a living thing, here was a little soul! And out there in the darkness were millions upon millions of other little souls, of little flame-like or coiled-up shapes alive and true.

A voice behind her said:

"Nothing nicer than darkness, is there?"

She knew at once it was the one who was going to bite; the voice was proper for him, having a nice, smothery sound. And looking round gratefully, she said:

"Do you like dinner-parties?"

It was jolly to watch his eyes twinkle and his thin cheeks puff out. He shook his head and muttered through that straggly moustache:

"You're a niece, aren't you? I know your father. He's a big man."

Hearing those words spoken of her father, Nedda flushed.

"Yes, he is," she said fervently.

Her new acquaintance went on:

"He's got the gift of truth – can laugh at himself as well as others; that's what makes him precious. These humming-birds here to-night couldn't raise a smile at their own tomfoolery to save their silly souls."

He spoke still in that voice of smothery wrath, and Nedda thought: 'He IS nice!'

"They've been talking about 'the Land'" – he raised his hands and ran them through his palish hair – "'the Land!' Heavenly Father! 'The Land!' Why! Look at that fellow!"

Nedda looked and saw a man, like Richard Coeur de Lion in the history books, with a straw-colored moustache just going gray.

"Sir Gerald Mallory – hope he's not a friend of yours! Divine right of landowners to lead 'the Land' by the nose! And our friend

Britto!"

Nedda, following his eyes, saw a robust, quick-eyed man with a suave insolence in his dark, clean-shaved face.

"Because at heart he's just a supercilious ruffian, too cold-blooded to feel, he'll demonstrate that it's no use to feel – waste of valuable time – ha! valuable! – to act in any direction. And that's a man they believe things of. And poor Henry Wiltram, with his pathetic: 'Grow our own food – maximum use of the land as food-producer, and let the rest take care of itself!' As if we weren't all long past that feeble individualism; as if in these days of world markets the land didn't stand or fall in this country as a breeding-ground of health and stamina and nothing else. Well, well!"

"Aren't they really in earnest, then?" asked Nedda timidly.

"Miss Freeland, this land question is a perfect tragedy. Bar one or two, they all want to make the omelette without breaking eggs; well, by the time they begin to think of breaking them, mark me – there'll be no eggs to break. We shall be all park and suburb. The real men on the land, what few are left, are dumb and helpless; and these fellows here for one reason or another don't mean business – they'll talk and tinker and top-dress – that's all. Does your father take any interest in this? He could write something very nice."

"He takes interest in everything," said Nedda. "Please go on, Mr. – Mr. – " She was terribly afraid he would suddenly remember that she was too young and stop his nice, angry talk.

"Cuthcott. I'm an editor, but I was brought up on a farm, and know something about it. You see, we English are grumblers, snobs to the backbone, want to be something better than we are; and education nowadays is all in the direction of despising what is quiet and humdrum. We never were a stay-at-home lot, like the French. That's at the back of this business – they may treat it as they like, Radicals or Tories, but if they can't get a fundamental change of opinion into the national mind as to what is a sane and profitable life; if they can't work a revolution in the spirit of our education, they'll do no good. There'll be lots of talk and tinkering, tariffs and tommy-rot, and, underneath, the land-bred men dying, dying all the time. No, madam, industrialism and vested interests have got us! Bar the most strenuous national heroism, there's nothing for it now but the garden city!"

"Then if we WERE all heroic, 'the Land' could still be saved?"

Mr. Cuthcott smiled.

"Of course we might have a European war or something that would shake everything up. But, short of that, when was a country ever consciously and homogeneously heroic – except China with its opium? When did it ever deliberately change the spirit of its education, the trend of its ideas; when did it ever, of its own free will, lay its vested interests on the altar; when did it ever say with a convinced and resolute heart: 'I will be healthy and simple before anything. I will not let the love of sanity and natural conditions die out of me!' When, Miss Freeland, when?"

And, looking so hard at Nedda that he almost winked, he

added:

"You have the advantage of me by thirty years. You'll see what I shall not – the last of the English peasant. Did you ever read 'Erewhon,' where the people broke up their machines? It will take almost that sort of national heroism to save what's left of him, even."

For answer, Nedda wrinkled her brows horribly. Before her there had come a vision of the old, lame man, whose name she had found out was Gaunt, standing on the path under the apple-trees, looking at that little something he had taken from his pocket. Why she thought of him thus suddenly she had no idea, and she said quickly:

"It's awfully interesting. I do so want to hear about 'the Land.' I only know a little about sweated workers, because I see something of them."

"It's all of a piece," said Mr. Cuthcott; "not politics at all, but religion – touches the point of national self-knowledge and faith, the point of knowing what we want to become and of resolving to become it. Your father will tell you that we have no more idea of that at present than a cat of its own chemical composition. As for these good people here to-night – I don't want to be disrespectful, but if they think they're within a hundred miles of the land question, I'm a – I'm a Jingo – more I can't say."

And, as if to cool his head, he leaned out of the window.

"Nothing is nicer than darkness, as I said just now, because you can only see the way you MUST go instead of a hundred and

fifty ways you MIGHT. In darkness your soul is something like your own; in daylight, lamplight, moonlight, never."

Nedda's spirit gave a jump; he seemed almost at last to be going to talk about the things she wanted, above all, to find out. Her cheeks went hot, she clenched her hands and said resolutely:

"Mr. Cuthcott, do you believe in God?"

Mr. Cuthcott made a queer, deep little noise; it was not a laugh, however, and it seemed as if he knew she could not bear him to look at her just then.

"H'm!" he said. "Every one does that – according to their natures. Some call God IT, some HIM, some HER, nowadays – that's all. You might as well ask – do I believe that I'm alive?"

"Yes," said Nedda, "but which do YOU call God?"

As she asked that, he gave a wriggle, and it flashed through her: 'He must think me an awful enfant terrible!' His face peered round at her, queer and pale and puffy, with nice, straight eyes; and she added hastily:

"It isn't a fair question, is it? Only you talked about darkness, and the only way – so I thought – "

"Quite a fair question. My answer is, of course: 'All three'; but the point is rather: Does one wish to make even an attempt to define God to oneself? Frankly, I don't! I'm content to feel that there is in one some kind of instinct toward perfection that one will still feel, I hope, when the lights are going out; some kind of honour forbidding one to let go and give up. That's all I've got; I really don't know that I want more."

Nedda clasped her hands.

"I like that," she said; "only – what is perfection, Mr. Cuthcott?"

Again he emitted that deep little sound.

"Ah!" he repeated, "what is perfection? Awkward, that – isn't it?"

"Is it" – Nedda rushed the words out – "is it always to be sacrificing yourself, or is it – is it always to be – to be expressing yourself?"

"To some – one; to some – the other; to some – half one, half the other."

"But which is it to me?"

"Ah! that you've got to find out for yourself. There's a sort of metronome inside us – wonderful, sell-adjusting little machine; most delicate bit of mechanism in the world – people call it conscience – that records the proper beat of our tempos. I guess that's all we have to go by."

Nedda said breathlessly:

"Yes; and it's frightfully hard, isn't it?"

"Exactly," Mr. Cuthcott answered. "That's why people devised religions and other ways of having the thing done second-hand. We all object to trouble and responsibility if we can possibly avoid it. Where do you live?"

"In Hampstead."

"Your father must be a stand-by, isn't he?"

"Oh, yes; Dad's splendid; only, you see, I AM a good deal

younger than he. There was just one thing I was going to ask you. Are these very Bigwigs?"

Mr. Cuthcott turned to the room and let his screwed-up glance wander. He looked just then particularly as if he were going to bite.

"If you take 'em at their own valuation: Yes. If at the country's: So-so. If at mine: Ha! I know what you'd like to ask: Should I be a Bigwig in THEIR estimation? Not I! As you knock about, Miss Freeland, you'll find out one thing – all bigwiggery is founded on: Scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours. Seriously, these are only tenpenny ones; but the mischief is, that in the matter of 'the Land,' the men who really are in earnest are precious scarce. Nothing short of a rising such as there was in 1832 would make the land question real, even for the moment. Not that I want to see one – God forbid! Those poor doomed devils were treated worse than dogs, and would be again."

Before Nedda could pour out questions about the rising in 1832, Stanley's voice said:

"Cuthcott, I want to introduce you!"

Her new friend screwed his eyes up tighter and, muttering something, put out his hand to her.

"Thank you for our talk. I hope we shall meet again. Any time you want to know anything – I'll be only too glad. Good night!"

She felt the squeeze of his hand, warm and dry, but rather soft, as of a man who uses a pen too much; saw him following her uncle across the room, with his shoulders a little hunched, as if

preparing to inflict, and ward off, blows. And with the thought: 'He must be jolly when he gives them one!' she turned once more to the darkness, than which he had said there was nothing nicer. It smelled of new-mown grass, was full of little shiverings of leaves, and all colored like the bloom of a black grape. And her heart felt soothed.

CHAPTER IX

"…When I first saw Derek I thought I should never feel anything but shy and hopeless. In four days, only in four days, the whole world is different… And yet, if it hadn't been for that thunder-storm, I shouldn't have got over being shy in time. He has never loved anybody – nor have I. It can't often be like that – it makes it solemn. There's a picture somewhere – not a good one, I know – of a young Highlander being taken away by soldiers from his sweetheart. Derek is fiery and wild and shy and proud and dark – like the man in that picture. That last day along the hills – along and along – with the wind in our faces, I could have walked forever; and then Joyfields at the end! Their mother's wonderful; I'm afraid of her. But Uncle Tod is a perfect dear. I never saw any one before who noticed so many things that I didn't, and nothing that I did. I am sure he has in him what Mr. Cuthcott said we were all losing – the love of simple, natural conditions. And then, THE moment, when I stood with Derek at the end of the orchard, to say good-by. The field below covered with those moony-white flowers, and the cows all dark and sleepy; the holy feeling down there was wonderful, and in the branches over our heads, too, and the velvety, starry sky, and the dewiness against one's face, and the great, broad silence – it was all worshipping something, and I was worshipping – worshipping happiness. I WAS happy, and I think HE was. Perhaps I shall never be so

happy again. When he kissed me I didn't think the whole world had so much happiness in it. I know now that I'm not cold a bit; I used to think I was. I believe I could go with him anywhere, and do anything he wanted. What would Dad think? Only the other day I was saying I wanted to know everything. One only knows through love. It's love that makes the world all beautiful – makes it like those pictures that seem to be wrapped in gold, makes it like a dream – no, not like a dream – like a wonderful tune. I suppose that's glamour – a goldeny, misty, lovely feeling, as if my soul were wandering about with his – not in my body at all. I want it to go on and on wandering – oh! I don't want it back in my body, all hard and inquisitive and aching! I shall never know anything so lovely as loving him and being loved. I don't want anything more – nothing! Stay with me, please – Happiness! Don't go away and leave me!.. They frighten me, though; he frightens me – their idealism; wanting to do great things, and fight for justice. If only I'd been brought up more like that – but everything's been so different. It's their mother, I think, even more than themselves. I seem to have grown up just looking on at life as at a show; watching it, thinking about it, trying to understand – not living it at all. I must get over that; I will. I believe I can tell the very moment I began to love him. It was in the schoolroom the second evening. Sheila and I were sitting there just before dinner, and he came, in a rage, looking splendid. 'That footman put out everything just as if I were a baby – asked me for suspenders to fasten on my socks; hung the things

on a chair in order, as if I couldn't find out for myself what to put on first; turned the tongues of my shoes out! – curled them over!' Then Derek looked at me and said: 'Do they do that for you? – And poor old Gaunt, who's sixty-six and lame, has three shillings a week to buy him everything. Just think of that! If we had the pluck of flies – ' And he clenched his fists. But Sheila got up, looked hard at me, and said: 'That'll do, Derek.' Then he put his hand on my arm and said: 'It's only Cousin Nedda!' I began to love him then; and I believe he saw it, because I couldn't take my eyes away. But it was when Sheila sang 'The Red Sarafan,' after dinner, that I knew for certain. 'The Red Sarafan' – it's a wonderful song, all space and yearning, and yet such calm – it's the song of the soul; and he was looking at me while she sang. How can he love me? I am nothing – no good for anything! Alan calls him a 'run-up kid, all legs and wings.' Sometimes I hate Alan; he's conventional and stodgy – the funny thing is that he admires Sheila. She'll wake him up; she'll stick pins into him. No, I don't want Alan hurt – I want every one in the world to be happy, happy – as I am… The next day was the thunder-storm. I never saw lightning so near – and didn't care a bit. If he were struck I knew I should be; that made it all right. When you love, you don't care, if only the something must happen to you both. When it was over, and we came out from behind the stack and walked home through the fields, all the beasts looked at us as if we were new and had never been seen before; and the air was ever so sweet, and that long, red line of cloud low down in the purple,

and the elm-trees so heavy and almost black. He put his arm round me, and I let him… It seems an age to wait till they come to stay with us next week. If only Mother likes them, and I can go and stay at Joyfields. Will she like them? It's all so different to what it would be if they were ordinary. But if he were ordinary I shouldn't love him; it's because there's nobody like him. That isn't a loverish fancy – you only have to look at him against Alan or Uncle Stanley or even Dad. Everything he does is so different; the way he walks, and the way he stands drawn back into himself, like a stag, and looks out as if he were burning and smouldering inside; even the way he smiles. Dad asked me what I thought of him! That was only the second day. I thought he was too proud, then. And Dad said: 'He ought to be in a Highland regiment; pity – great pity!' He is a fighter, of course. I don't like fighting, but if I'm not ready to, he'll stop loving me, perhaps. I've got to learn. O Darkness out there, help me! And Stars, help me! O God, make me brave, and I will believe in you forever! If you are the spirit that grows in things in spite of everything, until they're like the flowers, so perfect that we laugh and sing at their beauty, grow in me, too; make me beautiful and brave; then I shall be fit for him, alive or dead; and that's all I want. Every evening I shall stand in spirit with him at the end of that orchard in the darkness, under the trees above the white flowers and the sleepy cows, and perhaps I shall feel him kiss me again… I'm glad I saw that old man Gaunt; it makes what they feel more real to me. He showed me that poor laborer Tryst, too, the one who mustn't marry his

wife's sister, or have her staying in the house without marrying her. Why should people interfere with others like that? It does make your blood boil! Derek and Sheila have been brought up to be in sympathy with the poor and oppressed. If they had lived in London they would have been even more furious, I expect. And it's no use my saying to myself 'I don't know the laborer, I don't know his hardships,' because he is really just the country half of what I do know and see, here in London, when I don't hide my eyes. One talk showed me how desperately they feel; at night, in Sheila's room, when we had gone up, just we four. Alan began it; they didn't want to, I could see; but he was criticising what some of those Bigwigs had said – the 'Varsity makes boys awfully conceited. It was such a lovely night; we were all in the big, long window. A little bat kept flying past; and behind the copper-beech the moon was shining on the lake. Derek sat in the windowsill, and when he moved he touched me. To be touched by him gives me a warm shiver all through. I could hear him gritting his teeth at what Alan said – frightfully sententious, just like a newspaper: 'We can't go into land reform from feeling, we must go into it from reason.' Then Derek broke out: 'Walk through this country as we've walked; see the pigsties the people live in; see the water they drink; see the tiny patches of ground they have; see the way their roofs let in the rain; see their peeky children; see their patience and their hopelessness; see them working day in and day out, and coming on the parish at the end! See all that, and then talk about reason! Reason! It's the coward's excuse, and the

rich man's excuse, for doing nothing. It's the excuse of the man who takes jolly good care not to see for fear that he may come to feel! Reason never does anything, it's too reasonable. The thing is to act; then perhaps reason will be jolted into doing something.' But Sheila touched his arm, and he stopped very suddenly. She doesn't trust us. I shall always be being pushed away from him by her. He's just twenty, and I shall be eighteen in a week; couldn't we marry now at once? Then, whatever happened, I couldn't be cut off from him. If I could tell Dad, and ask him to help me! But I can't – it seems desecration to talk about it, even to Dad. All the way up in the train to-day, coming back home, I was struggling not to show anything; though it's hateful to keep things from Dad. Love alters everything; it melts up the whole world and makes it afresh. Love is the sun of our spirits, and it's the wind. Ah, and the rain, too! But I won't think of that!.. I wonder if he's told Aunt Kirsteen!.."

CHAPTER X

While Nedda sat, long past midnight, writing her heart out in her little, white, lilac-curtained room of the old house above the Spaniard's Road, Derek, of whom she wrote, was walking along the Malvern hills, hurrying upward in the darkness. The stars were his companions; though he was no poet, having rather the fervid temper of the born swordsman, that expresses itself in physical ecstasies. He had come straight out from a stormy midnight talk with Sheila. What was he doing – had been the burden of her cry – falling in love just at this moment when they wanted all their wits and all their time and strength for this struggle with the Mallorings? It was foolish, it was weak; and with a sweet, soft sort of girl who could be no use. Hotly he had answered: What business was it of hers? As if one fell in love when one wished! She didn't know – her blood didn't run fast enough! Sheila had retorted, "I've more blood in my big toe than Nedda in all her body! A lot of use you'll be, with your heart mooning up in London!" And crouched together on the end of her bed, gazing fixedly up at him through her hair, she had chanted mockingly: "Here we go gathering wool and stars – wool and stars – wool and stars!"

He had not deigned to answer, but had gone out, furious with her, striding over the dark fields, scrambling his way through the hedges toward the high loom of the hills. Up on the short

grass in the cooler air, with nothing between him and those swarming stars, he lost his rage. It never lasted long – hers was more enduring. With the innate lordliness of a brother he already put it down to jealousy. Sheila was hurt that he should want any one but her; as if his love for Nedda would make any difference to their resolution to get justice for Tryst and the Gaunts, and show those landed tyrants once for all that they could not ride roughshod.

Nedda! with her dark eyes, so quick and clear, so loving when they looked at him! Nedda, soft and innocent, the touch of whose lips had turned his heart to something strange within him, and wakened such feelings of chivalry! Nedda! To see whom for half a minute he felt he would walk a hundred miles.

This boy's education had been administered solely by his mother till he was fourteen, and she had brought him up on mathematics, French, and heroism. His extensive reading of history had been focussed on the personality of heroes, chiefly knights errant, and revolutionaries. He had carried the worship of them to the Agricultural College, where he had spent four years; and a rather rough time there had not succeeded in knocking romance out of him. He had found that you could not have such beliefs comfortably without fighting for them, and though he ended his career with the reputation of a rebel and a champion of the weak, he had had to earn it. To this day he still fed himself on stories of rebellions and fine deeds. The figures of Spartacus, Montrose, Hofer, Garibaldi, Hampden, and John Nicholson,

were more real to him than the people among whom he lived, though he had learned never to mention – especially not to the matter-of-fact Sheila – his encompassing cloud of heroes; but, when he was alone, he pranced a bit with them, and promised himself that he too would reach the stars. So you may sometimes see a little, grave boy walking through a field, unwatched as he believes, suddenly fling his feet and his head every which way. An active nature, romantic, without being dreamy and book-loving, is not too prone to the attacks of love; such a one is likely to survive unscathed to a maturer age. But Nedda had seduced him, partly by the appeal of her touchingly manifest love and admiration, and chiefly by her eyes, through which he seemed to see such a loyal, and loving little soul looking. She had that indefinable something which lovers know that they can never throw away. And he had at once made of her, secretly, the crown of his active romanticism – the lady waiting for the spoils of his lance. Queer is the heart of a boy – strange its blending of reality and idealism!

Climbing at a great pace, he reached Malvern Beacon just as it came dawn, and stood there on the top, watching. He had not much aesthetic sense; but he had enough to be impressed by the slow paling of the stars over space that seemed infinite, so little were its dreamy confines visible in the May morning haze, where the quivering crimson flags and spears of sunrise were forging up in a march upon the sky. That vision of the English land at dawn, wide and mysterious, hardly tallied with

Mr. Cuthcott's view of a future dedicate to Park and Garden City. While Derek stood there gazing, the first lark soared up and began its ecstatic praise. Save for that song, silence possessed all the driven dark, right out to the Severn and the sea, and the fastnesses of the Welsh hills, and the Wrekin, away in the north, a black point in the gray. For a moment dark and light hovered and clung together. Would victory wing back into night or on into day? Then, as a town is taken, all was over in one overmastering rush, and light proclaimed. Derek tightened his belt and took a bee-line down over the slippery grass. He meant to reach the cottage of the laborer Tryst before that early bird was away to the fields. He meditated as he went. Bob Tryst was all right! If they only had a dozen or two like him! A dozen or two whom they could trust, and who would trust each other and stand firm to form the nucleus of a strike, which could be timed for hay harvest. What slaves these laborers still were! If only they could be relied on, if only they would stand together! Slavery! It WAS slavery; so long as they could be turned out of their homes at will in this fashion. His rebellion against the conditions of their lives, above all against the manifold petty tyrannies that he knew they underwent, came from use of his eyes and ears in daily contact with a class among whom he had been more or less brought up. In sympathy with, and yet not of them, he had the queer privilege of feeling their slights as if they were his own, together with feelings of protection, and even of contempt that they should let themselves be slighted. He was near enough to understand how

they must feel; not near enough to understand why, feeling as they did, they did not act as he would have acted. In truth, he knew them no better than he should.

He found Tryst washing at his pump. In the early morning light the big laborer's square, stubborn face, with its strange, dog-like eyes, had a sodden, hungry, lost look. Cutting short ablutions that certainly were never protracted, he welcomed Derek, and motioned him to pass into the kitchen. The young man went in, and perched himself on the window-sill beside a pot of Bridal Wreath. The cottage was one of the Mallorings', and recently repaired. A little fire was burning, and a teapot of stewed tea sat there beside it. Four cups and spoons and some sugar were put out on a deal table, for Tryst was, in fact, brewing the morning draught of himself and children, who still lay abed up-stairs. The sight made Derek shiver and his eyes darken. He knew the full significance of what he saw.

"Did you ask him again, Bob?"

"Yes, I asked 'im."

"What did he say?"

"Said as orders was plain. 'So long as you lives there,' he says, 'along of yourself alone, you can't have her come back.'"

"Did you say the children wanted looking after badly? Did you make it clear? Did you say Mrs. Tryst wished it, before she – "

"I said that."

"What did he say then?"

"'Sorry for you, m'lad, but them's m'lady's orders, an' I can't

go contrary. I don't wish to go into things,' he says; 'you know better'n I how far 'tis gone when she was 'ere before; but seein' as m'lady don't never give in to deceased wife's sister marryin', if she come back 'tis certain to be the other thing. So, as that won't do neither, you go elsewhere,' he says."

Having spoken thus at length, Tryst lifted the teapot and poured out the dark tea into the three cups.

"Will 'ee have some, sir?"

Derek shook his head.

Taking the cups, Tryst departed up the narrow stairway. And Derek remained motionless, staring at the Bridal Wreath, till the big man came down again and, retiring into a far corner, sat sipping at his own cup.

"Bob," said the boy suddenly, "do you LIKE being a dog; put to what company your master wishes?"

Tryst set his cup down, stood up, and crossed his thick arms – the swift movement from that stolid creature had in it something sinister; but he did not speak.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.