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Содержание

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FIRST

THE garden lay dozing in the summer sun, a sun, too, that was really hot and luminous, worthy of mid-June, and Philip Home had paid his acknowledgments to its power by twice moving his chair into the shifting shade of the house, which stood with blinds drawn down, as if blinking in the brightness. Somewhere on the lawn below him, but hidden by the flower-beds of the terraced walk, a mowing-machine was making its clicking journeys to and fro, and the sound of it seemed to him to be extraordinarily consonant to the still heat of the afternoon. Entirely in character also with the day was the light hot wind that stirred fitfully among the garden beds as if it had gone to sleep there, and now and then turned over and made the flowers rustle and sigh. Huge Oriental poppies drooped their scarlet heads, late wall-flowers still sent forth their hot, homely odour, peonies blazed and flaunted, purple irises rivalled in their fading glories the budding stars of clematis that swarmed up the stone vases on the terrace, golden rain showered from the laburnums, lilacs stood thick in fragrant clumps and clusters. Canterbury bells raised spires of dry, crinkly blue, and forget-me-nots – nearly over –

made a dim blue border to the glorious carpet of the beds. For the warm weather this year had come late but determinedly, spring flowers still lingered, and the later blossoms of early summer had been forced into premature appearance. This fact occupied Philip at this moment quite enormously. What would the garden be like in July? There must come a break somewhere, when the precious summer flowers were over, and before the autumn ones began.

It was not unreasonable of him to be proud of his garden, for any garden-lover would here have recognised a master-hand. Below, in the thick clay that bordered the Thames, were the roses kept apart, with no weed, no other flower to pilfer their rightful monopoly of "richness." A flight of twelve stone steps led up from this garden to the tennis lawn, a sheet of velvet turf, unbordered by any flowers to be trampled by ball-seekers, or to be respected by ball-losers. Above again where he sat now a deep herbaceous border ran round three sides of the gravelled space, in the middle of which a bronze fountain cast water over Nereids and aquatic plants, and behind him rose the dozing house, sun-blinds and rambler rose, jasmine and red bricks.

Certainly at this moment Philip was more than content with life, a very rare but a very enviable condition of affairs. The lines seemed to him to be laid not in pleasant but in ecstatic places, and youth, hard work, a well-earned holiday, keen sensibilities, and being in love combined to form a state of mind which might be envied by the happiest man God ever made. An hour's meditation

with a shut book which he had selected at random from the volumes on the drawing-room table had convinced him of this, and the interruption that now came to his solitary thoughts was as delightful in its own way as the thoughts themselves.

Mrs. Home did everything in the way most characteristic of her, and if a Dresden shepherdess could be conceived as sixty years old she might possibly rival the clean, precise delicacy of Philip's mother. She dressed in grey and Quakerish colours, but of an exquisite neatness, and her clothes smelled faintly but fragrantly of lavender and old-fashioned herbs. Even at sixty the china-prettiness of her face gave her pre-eminent charm; and her cheeks, wrinkled with no sharp lines of sudden shock, but with the long pleasant passage of time, were as pink and soft as a girl's. Her hair was perfectly white, but still abundant, and, taken up in rather old-fashioned lines above her temples gave a roundness and youth to her face which was entirely in keeping with her. As she stepped out of the drawing-room window she put up her parasol, and walked quietly over the gravel to where her dark, long-limbed son was sitting.

"Darling, would it not be wise of you to go for a row on the river?" she said. "Your holiday is so short. I want you to make the best of it."

Philip turned in his chair.

"Darling, it would be most unwise," he said. "The best holiday is to do nothing at all. People are so stupid! They think that if your brain, or what does duty for it, is tired, the remedy is to tire

your body also."

"But a little walk, perhaps, Philip," said she. "I can explain to your guests when they come. Do you know, I am rather frightened of them. That extraordinary Mr. Merivale, for instance. Will he want to take off all his clothes, and eat cabbages?"

Philip's grave face slowly relaxed into a smile. He hardly ever laughed, but his smile was very complete.

"I shall tell him you said that," he remarked.

Mrs. Home sat down with quite a thump at the horror of the thought.

"Dear Philip," she said, "you mustn't – you really mustn't."

He stretched out his hand to her.

"Oh, mother," he said, "what will cure you of being so indiscreet except threats, and putting those threats into execution if necessary? He will want to take off all his clothes, as we all shall, if it goes on being so hot. Only he won't any more than we shall. He will probably be extremely well-dressed. No, the Hermit is only the Hermit at the Hermitage. Even there he doesn't take off all his clothes, though he lives an outdoor life. You never quite have recognised what a remarkable person he is."

"I should remark him anywhere," said Mrs. Home in self-defence. "And what age is he, Philip? Is he twenty, or thirty, or what?"

Philip considered.

"He must be a year or two older than me," he said. "Yes, I

should say he was thirty-one. But it's quite true – he doesn't look any age; he looks ageless. Entirely the result of no clothes and cabbages."

"They always seem to me so tasteless," remarked Mrs. Home. "But they seem to suit him."

"Dear old Hermit!" said Philip. "I haven't seen him for a whole year. It becomes harder and harder to get him away from his beloved forest."

"I can never understand what he does with himself, year in, year out, down there," said Mrs. Home.

"He thinks," said Philip.

"I should call that doing nothing," remarked his mother.

"I know; there is that view of it. At the same time, it must be extremely difficult to think all day. I have been thinking for an hour, and I have quite finished. I should have had to begin to read if you hadn't come out. And whom else are you frightened of out of all these terrible people?"

Mrs. Home smoothed her grey gown a little nervously.

"I am frightened of Lady Ellington," she said. "She has so very much – so very much self-possession. She is so practical, too: she always tells me all sorts of ways of managing the house, and suggests all kinds of improvements. It is very kind of her, and she is always quite right. And I think I am a little afraid of Madge."

"Ah, I can't permit that," said Philip, smiling again.

This brought their talk at once into more intimate lands.

"Ah, dear Philip," she said. "I pray God that it may go well

with you!"

Philip sat upright in his chair, and the book fell unheeded to the ground.

"How did you guess?" he said. "I suspect you of being a witch, mother; and if we had lived a few hundred years ago, instead of now, it would have been my painful duty to have had you burned. It would have hurt you far more than me, because the sense of duty would have sustained me. I never said a word to you about Madge, yet you knew I was in love with her, I think, almost before I knew it myself."

"Yes, dear. I am sure I did," said Mrs. Home with gentle complacence.

"Well, you dear witch, tell me how you knew."

"Oh, Philip, it was easy to see. You never looked at any girl before like that. I used to be afraid you would never marry. You used to say dreadful things, you know, that really frightened me. Even since you were quite a little boy, you thought women were a bother. You used to say they couldn't play games, and were always in the way, and had headaches, and were without any sense of honour."

"All quite true in the main," said the misogynous Philip.

Mrs. Home held up her hands in protest.

"Dear, when have you known me have a headache, or do anything dishonourable?" she asked pertinently.

"I always excepted you. And I except Madge. She beat me at croquet the other day, and in the middle of the game volunteered

the information that she had not moved the ball she croquetted."

"She always would," said his mother gently. "Oh, Philip, good luck to your wooing, my dear!"

There was a long pause; a sparrow in a prodigious bustle alighted on the edge of the fountain, and drank as if it had been a traveller straight from Sahara; the wind woke again in the flower-beds and gave a long, fragrant sigh; the sun-blinds of the drawing-room stirred as it wandered by them, and the pale purple petals of a grape-bunch cluster of wisteria fell on the crimson-striped canvas. The exquisiteness of this midsummer moment struck Philip with a sudden pang of delight, none the less keen because the love with which his soul was full was not yet certain or complete: the pause before completion was his.

"Thank you, mother," he said at last. "I shall know very soon, I shall ask her while she is here."

He got up as he spoke.

"I can't sit still any more," he said. "Speaking of it has made me restless. I must go and do something violent. Perhaps I will take your advice and go for a row. They will not be here till nearly seven. Oh, by-the-way, Evelyn Dundas is coming, too. You will have someone to flirt with, mother."

"Dear, you say such dreadful things!" said Mrs. Home. "And if you say them while Lady Ellington is here, I shall feel so awkward."

"Well, Evelyn proposed to elope with you last time he was here," said Philip. "I think I shall commission him to paint your

portrait."

"Who wants the picture of an old woman like me?" said Mrs. Home. "But get him to do Madge's."

Philip considered this.

"That's an idea," he said. "He could paint her divinely. Really, mother – if ah! a big 'if.' Do you know, I'm rather uneasy about Evelyn."

"Why? I thought he was getting on so well."

"He is as far as painting goes. They think very highly of him. But the moment he gets a couple of hundred pounds he buys a motor-car or something, and next week his watch is in pawn. Now, when you are twenty-five, it is time to stop doing that."

"I know," said Mrs. Home. "He is dreadful! Last time he was here he gave me a pearl-brooch that must have cost him fifty pounds."

"That was to induce you to run away with him," remarked Philip. "That was quite understood, and I think you behaved rather badly in not doing so."

"Philip, you mustn't!"

"No, nor must you! And now I'm going on the river. If I get drowned it will be your fault for having suggested it."

"Ah, do be careful in those locks," said Mrs. Home. "I get so nervous always when the water goes down and down."

"There's more chance of getting drowned when it goes up and up," said her son, kissing her on the forehead as he passed her chair.

Philip Home at the age of thirty-one was, perhaps, as successful a man of his age as any in the financial world. His father, the head of one of the big South African houses, had died some five years before, and since then the burden of a very large and prosperous house had rested almost entirely on his shoulders, which physically as well as morally were broad. But he combined in an extraordinary degree the dash and initiative of youth with a cool-headedness and sobriety of judgment which, in general is not achieved until something of the fire of the other is lost, and his management was both brilliant and safe. Yet, as must always happen, the habit of mind necessary to the successful conduct of large financial interests, which among other ingredients is made up of incessant watchfulness and a certain hardness in judging and acting, had, it must be confessed, somewhat tinged his whole character, and the world in general was right in its estimate of him as a man who was rather brusque and unsympathetic, a man with an iron hand who did not always even remember to put on the velvet glove. This was a perfectly just conclusion as far as the world in general, that is to say, the world of mere acquaintances, was concerned, and Philip's fine collection of prints was considered to be regarded by him as an investment rather than a joy. They made the same judgment about his garden, thinking that the rarity of plants was a quality more highly-prized by him than their beauty. But where the world in general did him an injustice was that they did not allow for a circle which, though small, was far more intimate and vastly

more competent to form the true estimate of the man than they, the circle of friends. These were four in number – his mother, Madge Ellington, namely – and the two men to whom allusion has already been made, namely – the Hermit and Evelyn Dundas. They saw, all four of them, a perfectly different Philip to him who somewhat elbowed his way through the uninteresting ranks of acquaintances, or sat, detached from the real essential man, in his orderly office, harsh-faced, unsmiling and absorbed. And this essential Philip in his own sanctum, where only these four ever came, was, indeed, a very lovable and eager personage; and though the world did not know it, his prints really hung there, and in the windows his flowers blossomed. But few were admitted there, and those only not on business.

So this very efficient person, if we rate efficiency, as seems to be the fashion, by the amount of income-tax annually harvested by the State, left the shade of the house and his mother sitting there, whistled for the two fox-terriers that lay dozing in the shade and went off towards the river. The smile which he wore when in his sanctum of intimates still lingered on his face as he passed down the stone steps to the croquet lawn below, but then it faded. Nor did the gardener who was mowing the lawn smile.

"I gave orders it was to be mown yesterday morning," said Philip; "and it is only half done yet. Did you receive those orders or not?"

The man, a huge young Hercules, touched his cap.

"Yes, sir; at least – "

"There is no 'at least,'" said Philip. "If you can't do as you are told you will have to go."

And he whistled – that Philip who was a parody of himself – to the dogs, and went on.

But before he had got down to the river the official Philip had dispersed, mistlike, in the glorious golden blaze of the summer afternoon, and the man his mother knew (she would scarcely, indeed, have recognised the other) had taken his place again, and as he rowed lazily down the river he gave himself up to mere receptivity of the full-blown beauty that was shed broadcast on sky and land and water. The spring had long been backward and wet, but now the pitiless rains of April bore a glorious and iridescent fruit. Brimful ran the stream from bank to bank, one sheet of untarnished crystal, reflecting the luminous turquoise of the sky. To his right stretched meadows all golden with the flowering of the buttercup; and cattle, knee-deep in the feathery foliage, grazed contentedly, or stood in the shallows of the river to drink, breathing out long soft breaths of kine-fragrance. Between the fields stood elms, stalwart towers of innumerable leaf, and a little way below the red roofs of Pangbourne nestled among red and white flowering thorns. One such tree, a cascade of crimson blossom, grew near the river brink, and Philip paused on his oars a moment as he passed, for the sprays of colour were outlined by the vivid blue of the sky, and on either side stretched the incredible gold of the buttercups. No artist dared have painted that, yet how simple and

how triumphantly successful! To the left the sun was just sinking beneath the high lines of wooded hills, and already the tide of clear warm shadow was beginning to advance across the stream. In the woods that covered the hills every shade of green, from the pale milkiness of young beech to the dark velvet of the oak, were mingled together, and glowed as if lit from within with the flakes of sunlight that filtered through the leaves. But that divine restfulness of various green was, somehow less to Philip's mind than the shouting colours of the sunlit fields. For the tides of life, the strong, sweeping currents of vitality, of love, of the work without which the active brain grows hungry and starves, were dashing in headstrong race within him, and rest and tranquility and soft brooding over what has been seemed to him a poor substitute for the eager harvesting of youth. His sickle was in his hand, and he pressed eagerly forward through the ripening corn of life that fell in swathes to his sweeping strokes.

The little party who were assembling at his house that afternoon were to stay with him a week of Whitsuntide. He would, he expected, be probably obliged to go up to London for the inside of the last two days of their stay, but he had managed – chiefly by means of working some sixteen hours out of the twenty-four during the last week – to secure for himself five days of complete holiday. Like a wise man, he had refused to pepper his house with mere acquaintances when friends were there, and with only one out of his four guests did he, like his mother, not feel on terms of intimacy. Her presence, however,

as Madge's mother, was a matter of necessity, and Philip did not hide from himself the fact that she certainly favoured his suit. For Lady Ellington, as Mrs. Home had already remarked, was a very practical woman, and it seemed to her, in her own phrasing, that Madge could scarcely "do better." Her practical sense, it may be remarked, was like an all-fitting handle with a smart steel spring which grasped whatever was presented to it in firm tentacles; and the proper way of sweeping carpets, the right board wages for scullery-maids, the correct lead with doubled no trumps at bridge, were as clearly defined in her mind as the desirability of wealth in sons'-in-law. She was, it may be added, extremely generous with advice, being anxious to lay open to all the world the multifarious discoveries of her master-mind.

Lady Ellington was certainly a very handsome woman, and the passage of the glacier of years over her face and her mind had produced hardly any striations either on the one or the other. Her bodily health was superb, and she took the utmost care of it; while, since one of her most constantly applied maxims was to let no sadness or worry weigh on her, her mind had by this time become something like a very hard, bright, polished globe which it was impossible to dint or damage. She had strolled after tea with her hostess and Madge to the croquet lawn, leaving Evelyn Dundas and Tom Merivale to smoke and await Philip's return from the river. The gardener there was still engaged in his belated mowing, and Lady Ellington examined the cutter with a magisterial air.

"Very old-fashioned and heavy," she said. "You should get the new light American type. It does far more work, and a boy with it can get through what it takes a man to do with a heavier machine. How many gardeners do you keep, Mrs. Home."

The poor lady shook her head.

"I don't really know," she said. "How many are there of you, Hawkins?"

Lady Ellington sniffed rather contemptuously.

"The labour-sheet will tell you," she said. "Why are there no flower borders on this lawn?"

"Ah, that is Philip's plan," said his mother, delighted to be able to refer the inquisitor to another source. "He says that they get so trampled by people looking for balls."

"I should have thought wire-netting would have obviated that," said Lady Ellington. "Under the north wall there is an excellent aspect. Personally, I should put bulbs here. And the rose garden is below, is it not? Certainly Mr. Home keeps his garden in fairly good order."

This concession, though not altogether unqualified, was fully appreciated by Mrs. Home.

"I'm sure he spends enough on it," she said.

Lady Ellington laughed.

"That is the surest way of getting satisfactory results," she said. "It is all nonsense to say that flowers do best in the gardens of those that love them, unless that love takes the practical form of spending money on them. And in the latter case, they do equally

well if you hate them!"

This was in the best Ellingtonian manner, hard and clean-cut and glittering – there was nothing foggy about it – and it represented very fairly Lady Ellington's method of dealing with life. Love or hatred did not seem to her to matter very particularly; the dinner of herbs, at any rate, in the house of love was markedly less attractive to her than the well-ordered house of hate, and she could do without friends better than without a motor-car. She had had rather a hard tussel with life, and shrewd blows had been given on both sides; she had lost her money and her husband during the last few years, and, being without a son, the title and estates had gone to her husband's nephew, a man for whom for years she had felt, and indeed shown, an extreme dislike. Her jointure was narrow, and she had only got her motor-car by the simple expedient of ordering it but not paying for it. But of the two combatants – life and herself – life was at last beginning to get the worst of it. Certain speculations she had lately indulged in had brought her in money, and if once she could marry her daughter to Philip, she felt that this would be a knock-down blow to life, and her struggles on this side of the grave would be over. What might happen on the other side concerned her very little.

Madge meantime, while this short cross-examination had been going on, strolled a little behind the other two, with a faint smile of amusement in her eyes. She had inherited all her mother's beauty, and dark violet eyes glowed beneath her black

lashes. Her nose was a little tip-tilted, as if raised in curiosity about things in general, but her mouth somewhat contradicted that, for it drooped a little at the corners, as if to imply that her curiosity when satisfied proved rather disappointing. Curiosity and a shade of contempt, indeed, were the emotions most strongly in evidence on her face, and the observer – allowing that features may represent the character of their owner rather than that of her ancestry – would perhaps conclude that her habitual view of the world was of the kind that tends to laugh at rather than with that admirable comedy. Otherwise her face was strangely sexless; it was, indeed, more the face of a boy than of a girl. Even among tall women she was tall, and by her side Mrs. Home looked more than ever like a figure of Dresden china.

Lady Ellington after her sympathetic remark about flowers, turned to her daughter.

"Well situated, is it not, Madge?" she said. "And the river is below there. You will be all day on it, I expect, if Mr. Home is kind enough to take you. And who else is here, Mrs. Home?"

"Ah, there is no party at all, I am afraid," said she. "Philip said that acquaintances mix so badly with friends. Only Mr. Dundas and Mr. Merivale."

Lady Ellington thought this over for a moment, and the conclusion apparently was most satisfactory.

"That is charming of him!" she said. "It is always a compliment to be asked to a small party; whereas, if you have a houseful it doesn't matter who is there. Dear me, those roses

should be cut much further back, if they are to do any good. But it is quite true; if one asks friends and acquaintances together, the friends always wonder why the acquaintances have been asked, and the acquaintances are disgusted that nobody takes any notice of them. And I particularly want your son's advice on some shares I have lately purchased. Mr. Dundas, too – I am so glad to meet him. They say his portraits are going up in price so. I wonder if he could be induced – just a little sketch – Ah, there is Mr. Home coming up from the river. I wonder why he wears a dark coat on so hot a day?"

A little curiosity perhaps lingered in Madge's face when she met Philip, and certainly the contempt all vanished. She had a great respect and liking for him, and her whole expression brightened when she saw him. Then after greetings they strolled on, the two elder ladies in front.

"Mother has a great many questions to ask you," she said to him in a gentle, slow, but very audible voice. "She wants to know how many gardeners you have, why you don't cut your roses back and something about South African mines."

Philip's habit of neatness and instinct of gardening led him to stop a moment and nip off a couple of ill-localised buds from a rose. In effect the two others got a little further ahead of them. This may or may not have been intentional.

"All my information is at her service," he said – "particularly on the subject of roses, about which I know more than South African mines."

"And care more!" suggested Madge.

"Infinitely more. Are they not clearly more attractive?"

Madge looked at him curiously.

"I believe you really think so," she said. "And that is so odd. Doesn't the scheming, the calculation, the foresight required in financial things interest you enormously?"

"Certainly; but I scheme just as much over the roses. Whether this one is to have – well, a whisky-and-soda, or whether it is rheumatic and wants a lowering treatment; that is just as interesting in itself as whether South Africans want lowering or screwing up."

"You mean you can do that? You can send things up or down? You can say to us, to mother: 'You shall be poorer to-morrow or richer'?"

Philip laughed.

"I suppose so, to some extent. Pray don't let us talk about it. It sounds rather brutal, and I am afraid it is brutalising. Yet, after all, a landlord may put up the rent of his houses."

Madge Ellington walked on for a few paces without replying.

"How odd of you," she said at length, "not to feel the fascination of power. I don't mean to say that one would necessarily want to use it, but it must be so divine to know it is there. Well, if you wish, I won't talk about it."

Philip turned to her, his brown thin face looking suddenly eager.

"Ah, I would sooner hear you talk about what you please than

about what I please," he said.

She laughed.

"Can't I manage to combine the two?" she said. "The river, for instance, I think we both love that. Will you promise to let me live on the river while I am here?"

"I warn you that you will have a good deal of my company, then," said he.

She laughed again.

"But as you are my host I can't decently object," she said. "Oh, tell me, Mr. Home, what is Mr. Dundas like? You are a great friend of his, are you not? He was at tea, and asked a series of the silliest riddles, which somehow made me giggle. Giggle hopelessly, do you understand; they were so stupid. And he is the Mr. Dundas, who paints everybody as if they were so much more interesting than they are?"

"Yes, evidently the same," said Philip. "And what you say is quite true. Yet, again, as you say, his conversation is futile beyond words."

Madge walked on again in silence a little.

"I think that combination is rather charming," she said. "People don't laugh enough, and certainly he makes one laugh. I wish I laughed more, for instance."

"And has Merivale come?" asked Philip.

"Yes; he was at tea, too. What does he do?"

"He doesn't do anything. He just thinks."

"Good heavens! how frightfully fatiguing. All the time, do you

mean?"

"Yes, all the time. Have you never met him before? Yet, how should you? He lives in the New Forest, and communes with birds and animals. People think he is mad, but he is the sanest person I know."

"Why?" asked she.

"Because he has had the wit to find out what he likes, and to do it all the time."

"And what is that?" asked the girl.

"He sits by a stream and looks at the water. Then he lies on his back and looks at the sky. Then he whistles, chuckles, what you please to call it, and the thrushes come scudding out of the bushes and chuckle back at him."

"Is that not rather uncanny?" asked Madge.

"Most uncanny. Some day, as I tell him, he will see Pan. And I shall then have to attend a funeral."

The girl's eyebrows wrinkled into a frown.

"Pan?" she said.

"Yes; he is the God of 'Go as you please!' And his temple is a lunatic asylum. But don't be alarmed. The Hermit won't go into a lunatic asylum yet awhile."

"The Hermit?"

"Yes, the Hermit is Merivale. Because he lives quite alone in the New Forest. He never reads, he hardly ever sees anybody, he never does anything. He used to write at one time."

Madge shivered slightly.

"How intensely uncomfortable!" she said. "I think I shall like Mr. Dundas best."

"You are sure to like him."

"Because everybody does? That is the worst of reasons. I always distrust very popular people."

"The judgment of the world is usually wrong, you mean. But occasionally one stumbles on an exception."

The four had turned back towards the house, and as Philip spoke, he and his companion gained the top step of the gravelled square bordered by flower-beds, where he had sat two hours ago with his mother. The shadow of the house had swung over it, and in the gathering dusk the flower-beds glowed with a dim subaqueous radiance. Philip's mother and Lady Ellington had already passed into the open French window of the drawing-room, but on the stout balustrade of the terrace there sat a young man. One long slim leg rested on the gravel, the other was crooked round the lead vase at the head of the steps. His face, extraordinarily boyish, was clean-shaven, or rather so boyish was it, that it looked as if it was still untouched by razor. He held a cigarette in one hand, and the other, long-fingered and white as a woman's, grasped his knee.

"Oh, Philip!" he cried; "how are you? Oddly enough, I am quite well. I always was, like Sydney Smith and his great coat. Isn't there time for a game of croquet before dinner? Let's all be late, and so we shall all be punctual; it is only a question of degree. Miss Ellington, do come and play. Why did the barmaid

champagne, and – oh, I asked you that. Stout, porter is rather good though. I do believe you know it, Philip."

SECOND

TOM MERIVALE did not, as Mrs. Home had feared he might, appear without clothes at dinner, nor did he make clamorous demands for cabbage. It is true that he ate no meat of any kind, but he was not of the preaching sort of vegetarians, and did not call attention to his abstinence. Instead, he and Evelyn Dundas between them managed to turn the meal into a ridiculous piece of gaiety by sheer exuberance of animal spirits, and even Lady Ellington forgot to examine the dishes with her usual magisterial air, and really ate and drank without criticising.

There was an extraordinary superficial resemblance in certain ways between the two men. Both, at any rate, were glorious examples of the happiness that springs from health, a happiness which is as inimitable as it is contagious. By health, it must be premised, is not meant the mere absence of definite ailments, but that perfect poise between an active mind and an exuberant body which is so rare.

It was on this very subject that Merivale was speaking now.

"Ah, no, Lady Ellington," he was saying, "to be able to get through the day's work, day after day and year after year, is not health. Perfect health implies practically perfect happiness."

"But how if you have a definite cause of worry?" she said.

"You can't worry when you are well. One knows, for example, that if one is definitely unwell, the same cause produces greater

worry and discomfort than if one is not. And my theory is, that if one is absolutely well, if your mind and soul, that is to say, as well as your body, are all in accord with each other and with their environment, worry is impossible."

Lady Ellington, to do her justice, always listened to that were really new to her. She always assumed, by the way, that they were not.

"My theory exactly," she said. "I could scarcely have lived through these last years unless I had made up my mind never to let any anxiety take hold of me."

Evelyn Dundas laughed. Dinner was nearing its end and conversation was general.

"My mind and my body are not in absolute accord this moment," he said, "and I am rather anxious. My body demands some more ice-pudding; my mind tells me it would be extremely unwise. Which am I to listen to, Tom?"

"Give Mr. Dundas some more ice-pudding," remarked Philip to a footman.

"The laws of hospitality compel me to fall in with my host's suggestions," said Evelyn. "Tom, where you are wrong lies in thinking that it is worth while spending all your time in keeping well. He lives in the New Forest, Lady Ellington, and if when you are passing you hear the puffs of a loud steam-engine somewhere near Brockenhurst you will know it is Tom doing deep breathing. He expects in time to become a Ram-jam or something, by breathing himself into Raj-pan-puta."

Tom Merivale laughed.

"No, I don't want to become a Ram-jam," he said, "whatever that may be. I want to become myself."

"No clothes," murmured Mrs. Home.

"Become yourself?" asked Lady Ellington.

"Yes, most of us are stunted copies of our real selves," he said. "Imitations of what we might be. And what might one not be?"

The talk had got for him, at any rate, suddenly serious, and he looked up at Lady Ellington with a sparkling eye.

"Explain," she said.

"Well, it seems to me one cripples oneself in so many ways. One allows oneself to be nervous, and to be angry, and to be bound by conventions that are useless and cramping."

"Tall hats, frock-coats?" asked she.

"No, certainly not, because they, at any rate, are perfectly harmless. But, to take an example of what I mean, it seems to me a ridiculous convention that we should all consider ourselves obliged to know what is going on in the world. It does not really do one any good to know that there is war between China and Japan. What does do us good is not to be ill-tempered, and never to be sad. Sadness and pessimism are the worst forms of mental disease I know. And the state will not put sad and pessimistic people in asylums, or isolate them at any rate so that their disease should not spread. Such diseases are so frightfully catching, and they are more fatal than fevers. People die of them, soul and body!"

Lady Ellington felt that Mrs. Home was collecting her eye, and rose.

"What a fascinating theory," she said. "Just what I have always thought. Ah, I have caught my dress under my chair. You should have castors, Mr. Home, on your dining-room chairs."

* * * * * * *

Evelyn moved up next to Tom Merivale after the others had left them.

"Dear old Hermit!" he said. "Now, you've got to give an account of yourself. Neither Phil nor I have seen you for a year. What have you been doing?"

Tom let the port pass him.

"I suppose you would call it nothing," said he.

"Ah, but in real life people don't go and live in the New Forest and do nothing. What have you written in the last year?"

"Not one line. Seriously, I have been doing nothing except a little gardening and carpentering; just manual labour to keep one sane.'"

"Well, it looks as if it suited you. You look well enough, and what is so odd, you look so much younger."

Tom laughed again.

"Ah, that strikes you, does it?" he said. "I suppose it could not have been otherwise, though that wasn't my object in going to live there."

"Well, tell us, then!" said Evelyn, rather impatiently. He had begun to smoke, and smoked in a most characteristic manner; that is to say, that in little more than a minute his cigarette was consumed down one side, and was a peninsula of charred paper down the other, while clouds of smoke ascended from it. Perceiving this, he instantly lit another one.

But Philip rose.

"Tell us afterwards, Tom," he said. "Lady Ellington likes to play bridge, I know, as soon as dinner is over."

Evelyn rose also.

"Ah, she is like me," he said. "She wants to do things not soon, but immediately, Philip, how awfully pretty Miss Ellington is. Why wasn't I told? I should like to paint her."

Philip paused by the door.

"Really, do you mean that?" he said. "And have you got time? I hear you always have more orders than you can ever get through."

Evelyn tossed his head with a quick, petulant gesture.

"You talk as if I was a tailor," he said. "But you suggest to me the advisability of my getting apprentices to paint the uninteresting people for me, and I will sign them. That would satisfy a lot of them. Yes, I have more than I can do. But I could do Miss Ellington remarkably well. Shall I ask her to sit for me?"

"That would be rather original, the first time you saw her."

"A good reason for doing it," said Evelyn, hastily drinking another glass of port.

"But it would certainly give her a good reason for saying 'No,'"

remarked Philip.

Madge, it appeared, did not play bridge; her mother, at any rate, said she did not, and Evelyn Dundas, rather to his satisfaction, cut out. That feat happily accomplished, he addressed himself to Madge.

"Fancy a hermit playing bridge!" he said. "Does it not seem to you very inconsistent? Patience is the furthest he has any right to go."

Madge got up.

"Patience, both in cards and in real life, seems to me a very poor affair," she said. "How are we going to amuse ourselves while they play? Will you go out of the room while I think of something, and then you can come in and guess it?"

An amendment occurred to Evelyn.

"We might both go out," he said. "It is deliciously warm; just out on to the terrace."

"And when we come in they can guess where we have been," said Madge.

The night, as he had said, was deliciously warm, and the moon, a day or two only from full, shone with a very clear light. Below them lay the dim, huddled woods, and beyond, shining like a streak of silver, slept the Thames. Somewhere far away a train was panting along its iron road, and to the left scattered lights showed where Pangbourne stood. Odours of flowers were wafted from the beds, and pale-winged moths now and then crossed the illuminated spaces of light thrown by the drawing-room window

on to the gravel.

"Ah, what a pity to be indoors!" said the girl as they stepped out. "I suppose I must be of Gipsy blood; I always want to go somewhere."

"Where particularly?" asked he.

"That doesn't matter; the going is the point. If you asked me to go to the Black Hole of Calcutta I should probably say 'Yes.' What a pity we can't go on the river!"

"Ah, let us do that!" said he.

Madge laughed.

"It would be quite unheard-of," she said. "I don't live in the New Forest like Mr. Merivale, and cast conventions aside. No, we will walk up and down a little, and then you shall go and play. Do you know, I am really so pleased to have met you I have admired your pictures so. Do you find it a bore having that sort of thing said to you?"

Evelyn thought over this for a moment.

"Well, I think my pictures bore me when they are done," he said, "though the opinion of other people never does. A picture is – is like a cold in the head. It possesses you while it is there, and you have to throw it off. And when it is thrown off, one never thinks of it again. At least, I don't."

They had come to the end of the terrace, and the girl stopped as they turned.

"And then you do another. Ah, how delightful to know that probably to the end of your life you will have things to do!"

"I don't think you would say that if you had to do them," said he. "Yet, I don't know. Of course creating a thing is the biggest fun in the world. But how one tears one's hair over it!"

Madge looked at his thick black thatch.

"You seem to have got some left," she remarked.

"Yes, but I'm looking thinner. Mrs. Home told me so. Oh, look at the moon! What a dreadful thing to say, too! But it really is out of drawing – it is far too big!"

"Perhaps we are far too small," said she.

Evelyn shook his head.

"It is impossible to be small if that occurs to you," he said.

They walked in silence after this for a dozen yards or so, Madge feeling, somehow, strangely attracted by her companion. There was nothing, it is true, particularly brilliant about his conversation; it was boyish rather than brilliant; but she felt, as most people did, that she was in the presence of a personality that was rather unusual. And this personality seemed to her to be very faithfully expressed in his pictures; there was something daringly simple about both him and them. He evidently said whatever came into his head, and her experience was that so many people only talked about such things as were supposed to be of interest. Also, in spite of this moonlight solitude, he evinced not the smallest tendency to notice the fact that she was a very good-looking girl; no hint of it appeared in his talk or his attitude to her. There was not the very slightest suspicion of that even in his desire to go on the river with her. That ridiculous

suggestion she felt, with unerring instinct, had been made simply from comrade to comrade; there were two of them together, cut out from a table of bridge, and he had proposed it just as he might have proposed it to a man, instead of a girl, of his own age. And to Madge this was something of an exception in her experience of the other sex, for most unmarried men of her acquaintance had shown a tendency towards tenderness. Her beauty made it perhaps excusable in them, but she found it rather trying. It was a relief, at any rate, to find a young man who took her frankly, who could say "Look at the moon," only to point out that it was out of drawing. For in the matter of emotion Madge was strangely unfeeling, or, at any rate, strangely undeveloped; and if her mother had let any anxiety dwell upon her hard and polished mind, the doubts about Madge's future would, perhaps, have pressed as heavily there as any. As a good mother should, she had brought to her daughter's notice, not to say thrown at her head, a large variety of young men, to none of whom had Madge responded at all satisfactorily. And it was almost intensely pleasing to her at this moment to find someone matrimonially quite impossible to her mother's mind, who was both so attractive to her personally, and who did not show the smallest desire to treat her otherwise than a man should treat a man. He was perfectly natural, in fact, perfectly simple, and quite an exception to her experience of moonlight walkers. And this paragon continued his peerless way.

"Have you met Tom Merivale before?" he asked. "No? Of

course he would think it almost profane to say the moon was too large. He takes any fact in nature and then proceeds to fit himself to it. Whatever untutored nature does is right, in his view. I wonder what he would make of slugs eating the faces of pansies slowly away. I shall ask him."

Madge gave a little shriek of horror.

"That is one of the facts of life which I can't get over," she said. "I can't reconcile myself to wanton destruction of beauty. Oh, there is so little in the world."

Now, there is a particular mental sensation which corresponds to the physical sensation of stepping up a step when there is no step there. Evelyn felt this now.

She had gone suddenly into vacancy, with a thump.

"What do you mean?" he said. "I should have thought there was so much there that one was bewildered. Surely almost everything is beautiful."

"Do you really think that?" she asked.

"Why, of course. But the trouble is that one has not wits enough to see it. And all beauty is equal – woman, man, mountain-side, pansy. And probably slug," he added. "But to appreciate that would require a great deal of insight. But Sir John Lubbock says that earwigs are excellent mothers. That opened my eyes to earwigs."

Again Madge walked on in silence for a space.

"Are you ever bored?" she asked at length.

"Bored? No. All that anyone has ever made is at one's disposal

to wonder at. And if one can't do that, one can go and make something oneself. No, I hope I shall have the grace to commit suicide before I am bored."

Madge stopped and turned to him. That she was being unwise she knew, but something intimate and indwelling dictated to her.

"I am bored every day of my life!" she said. "And how can I avoid it? Is it very stupid of me?"

Evelyn did not hesitate in his reply.

"Yes, very!" he said. "Because it is such a waste of time to be bored. People don't recollect that."

They had come opposite the drawing-room window, and as they passed Lady Ellington stepped out on to the terrace.

"Is that you, Madge?" she asked.

Even in the darkness Evelyn knew what had happened to Madge's face. The fall of it was reflected in her voice.

"Yes; have you finished your bridge?" she asked.

"We are waiting for Mr. – Mr. Dundas to cut in," she said. "Mr. Home thought he was in the smoking-room, and has gone there."

"Oh, I am not in the smoking-room," said Evelyn.

If one judged by definitions given in dictionaries it would probably be a misuse of language to say that Lady Ellington "played" bridge. Cards were dealt her, and she dealt with them, embarking on commercial transactions. She assessed the value of her hand with far more accuracy than she had ever brought to play on the assessment of her income-tax, and proceeded

to deal with her assets with even more acuteness than she was accustomed to dispose on the expenditure of her income. Mrs. Home had silently entreated Philip to allow her to cut out, and Lady Ellington was left to play with three men. This she always enjoyed, because she took full advantage of the slight concessions which were allowed to her sex if no other woman was of the table. But before embarking on the second rubber she turned to Madge.

"I want to speak to you, dearest," she said, "before you go to bed. We shall only play a couple more rubbers. Mr. Home, you really ought to have pneumatic cards; they are a little more expensive, but last so much longer – yes, two more rubbers – I go no trumps – and I will come to your room on my way up. No doubling? Thank you, partner; that is the suit I wanted."

Philip, who was her partner, had exposed two excellent suits, so the imagination of the others might run riot over which particular suit was the desire of Lady Ellington. At any rate she scored a little slam, but was not satisfied, and turned on Evelyn, who, it is idle to remark, had talked during the play.

"I missed a nine," she said. "Mr. Dundas was saying something very amusing."

But as her face had been like flint, Mr. Dundas had to draw the inference that, however amusing, she had not been amused.

Lady Ellington always kept the score herself, and never showed any signs of moving, if she had won, until accounts had been adjusted and paid. To-night affairs had gone prosperously

for her; she was gracious in her "good-nights," and even commended the admirable temperature of the hot water, a glass of which she always sipped before going to bed. Madge had gone upstairs, but not long before; and her mother, having locked her winnings into her dressing-case, came to her room and found her sitting by the open window, still not yet preparing to go to bed.

"Do I understand that you walked on the terrace alone with Mr. Dundas?" she asked in a peculiarly chilly voice.

Madge showed no surprise; she had known what was coming.

"Yes, we took a turn or two," she said.

Her mother sat down; Madge had not turned from the window and was still looking out.

"Kindly attend, Madge," she said. "It was very indiscreet, and you know it. I don't think Mr. Home liked it."

Of the girl who had talked so eagerly and naturally to Evelyn on the terrace there was hardly a trace; Madge's face had grown nearly as hard as her mother's.

"I am not bound just yet to do all Mr. Home likes," she said.

"You are bound, if you are a sensible creature, at all events not to run any risks, especially now."

Madge turned away from the window.

"You mean until the bargain is completed. Supposing I refuse?" she said, and there was a little tremor in her voice, partly of contempt, partly of fear.

Lady Ellington, as has been remarked, never let her emotions, however justifiable, run away with her; she never, above all,

got hot or angry. Causes which in others would produce anger, produced in her only an additional coldness and dryness, which Madge was, somehow, afraid of with unreasoning nightmare kind of fear.

"I will not suppose anything so absurd!" said her mother. "You are twenty-five years old, and you have never yet fallen in love at all. But as I have pointed out to you before, you will be far happier married than living on into the loneliness and insignificance of being an old maid. Lots of girls never fall in love in the silly, sentimental manner which produces lyrics. You are quite certainly one of them. And as certainly Mr. Home is in love with you."

"We have been into this before," said the girl.

"It is necessary, apparently, to go into it again. Mr. Home, I feel certain, is going to propose to you, and you should not do indiscreet things. With regard to your refusing him, it is out of the question. He is extremely suitable in every way. And you told me yourself you had made up your mind to accept him."

"You made up my mind," said Madge; "but it comes to the same thing."

"Precisely. So please promise me not to do anything which a girl in your position should not do. There is no earthly harm in your walking with any penniless artist in the moonlight, if you were not situated as you are. But at the moment it is indiscreet."

"You are wrong if you suppose that Mr. Dundas said anything to me which could possibly be interpreted into a tender interest,"

said Madge. “He called attention to the moon merely in order to remark that it was out of drawing.”

“That never occurred to me,” said her mother, “though it would be a matter of total indifference whether he took a tender interest in you or not. I merely want your promise that you will not repeat the indiscretion.”

“Oh, certainly,” said Madge.

Lady Ellington had put her bedroom candle on Madge’s dressing-table. As soon as she had received the assurance she required, she at once rose from her chair and took it up. But with it in her hand she stood silent a moment, then she put it down again.

“You have spoken again of things I thought were settled, Madge,” she said, “and I should like your assurance on one point further. We agreed, did we not, that it would be far better for you to marry than remain single. We agreed also that you were not of the sort of nature that falls passionately in love, and we agreed that you had better marry a man whom you thoroughly like and esteem. Mr. Home is such a man. Is that correctly stated?”

“Quite,” said Madge. “In fact, I don’t know why I suggested that I should refuse him.”

“You agree to it all still?”

Madge considered a moment.

“Yes; things being as they are, I agree.”

“What do you mean by that exactly?”

Madge got up, and swept across the room to where her mother

stood.

"I have long meant to say this to you, mother," she said, "but I never have yet. I mean that at my age one's character to some extent certainly is formed. One has to deal with oneself as that self exists. But my character was formed by education partly and by my upbringing, for which you are responsible. I think you have taught me not to feel – to be hard."

Lady Ellington did not resent this in the slightest; indeed, it was part of her plan of life never to resent what anybody did or said; for going back to first principles, resentment was generally so useless.

"I hope I have taught you to be sensible," she remarked.

"It seems to me I am being very sensible now," said Madge, "and you may certainly take all the credit of that, if you wish. I fully intend to do, at any rate, exactly what you suggest – to accept, that is to say, a man whom I both esteem and respect, and who is thoroughly suitable. For suitable let us say wealthy – because that is what we mean."

Lady Ellington qualified this.

"I should not wish you to marry a cad, however wealthy," she said.

Madge moved softly up and down the room, her dress whispering on the carpet before she replied.

"And it does not strike you that this is rather a cold-blooded proceeding?" she asked.

"It would if you were in love with somebody else. In which

case I should not recommend you to marry Mr. Home. But as it is, it is the most sensible thing you can do. I would go further than that; I should say it was your duty."

Again Madge walked up and down without replying at once.

"Ah, it is cold-blooded," she said, "and I am doing it because I am cold-blooded."

Then she stopped opposite her mother.

"Mother, when other girls fall in love, do they only feel like this?" she asked. "Is this all? Just to feel that for the rest of one's life one will always have a very pleasant companion in the house, who, I am sure, will always deserve one's liking and esteem?"

Lady Ellington laughed.

"My dear, I can't say what other girls feel. But, as you remark, it is all you feel. You are twenty-five years old, and you have never fallen in love. As you say, you have to take yourself as you are. Good night, dear. It is very late."

She kissed her, left her, and went down the passage to her own room. She was a very consistent woman, and it was not in the slightest degree likely that she should distrust the very sensible train of reasoning which she had indicated to her daughter, which also she had held for years, that a sensible marriage is the best policy in which to invest a daughter's happiness. Lady Ellington's own experience, indeed, supplied her with evidence to support her view, for she herself was an excellent case in point, for her husband had been a man with whom she had never been the least in love, but with whom, on the other hand, she had managed

to be very happy in a cast-iron sort of way. She felt, indeed, quite sure, in her reasonable mind, that she was acting wisely for Madge, and it was not in her nature to let an unreasonable doubt trouble her peace. But an unreasonable doubt was there, and it was this, that Madge for the first time, as far as she knew, seemed to have contemplated the possibility of passion coming into her life. There had been in her mind, so her mother felt sure, an unasked question – "What if I do fall in love?"

Lady Ellington turned this over in the well-lit chamber of her brain as she went to bed. But her common-sense came to her aid, and she did not lie awake thinking of it. She had made up her mind that such a thing was unlikely to the verge of impossibility, and she never wasted time or thought over what was impossible. Her imagination, it is true, was continually busy over likely combinations; there were, however, so many of these that things unlikely did not concern her.

The men meantime had gone to the smoking-room, and from there had moved out in general quest of coolness on to the terrace. The moon had risen nearly to the zenith, and no longer offended Evelyn's sense of proportion, and the night, dusky and warm, disposed to personal talk. And since neither Evelyn nor Philip had seen Tom Merivale for a year, it was he who had first to be brought up to date.

"So go on with what you were saying at dinner, Tom," said Evelyn. "Really, people who are friends ought to keep a sort of circulating magazine, in which they write themselves up and send

it round to the circle. In any case, you of the three of us are most in arrears. What have you done besides growing so much younger?"

"Do you really want to know?" asked he.

"Yes."

Evelyn rose as he spoke and squirted some soda-water into his glass. They were sitting in the square of light illuminated by the lamps of the room inside, and what passed was clearly visible to all of them.

"You must sit quiet then," said Tom, in his low, even-toned voice, "or you will frighten them."

"Them? Whom? Are you going to raise spirits from the vasty deep?" asked Philip.

"Oh, no; though I fancy it would not be so difficult. No, what I am going to show you, if you care to see it – it may take ten minutes – is a thing that requires no confederates. It is not the least exciting either. Only if you wish to see what I have done, as you call it, though personally I should say what I have become, I can give you an example probably. Oh, yes, more than probably, I am sure I can. But please sit still."

The night was very windless and silent. In the woods below a nightingale was singing, but the little wind which had stirred before among the garden beds had completely dropped.

"Have you begun?" asked Evelyn. "Or is that all? Is it that you have been silent for a year?"

"Ah, don't interrupt," said the other.

Again there was silence, except for the bubbling of the nightingale. Four notes it sang, four notes of white sound as pure as flame; then it broke into a liquid bubble of melodious water, all transparent, translucent, the apotheosis of song. Then a thrill of ecstasy possessed it, and cadence followed indescribable cadence, as if the unheard voice of all nature was incarnated. Then quite suddenly the song ceased altogether.

There was a long pause; both Evelyn and Philip sat in absolute silence, waiting. Tom Merivale had always been so sober and literal a fellow that they took his suggestion with the same faith that they took the statements of an almanack – it was sure to be the day that the almanack said it was. But for what they waited – what day it was – neither knew nor guessed.

Then the air was divided by fluttering wings; Tom held his hand out, and on the forefinger there perched a little brown bird.

"Sing, dear," said he.

The bird threw its head back, for nightingales sing with the open throat. And from close at hand they all three heard the authentic love song of the nightingale. The unpremeditated rapture poured from it, wings quivering, throat throbbing, the whole little brown body was alert with melody, instinctive, untaught, the melody of happiness, of love made audible. Then, tired, it stopped.

"Thank you, dear brother," said Tom. "Go home."

Again a flutter of wings whispered in the air, and his forefinger was untenanted.

"That is what I have done," he said. "But that is only the beginning."

Evelyn gave a long sigh.

"Are you mad, or are we?" he asked. "Or was there a bird there? Or are you a hypnotist?"

He got up quickly.

"Phil, I swear I saw a bird, and heard it sing," he said excitedly. "It was sitting there, there on his finger. What has happened? Go on, Tom – tell us what it means."

"It means you are the son of a monkey, as Darwin proved," said he, "and the grandson, so to speak, of a potato. That is all. It was a cousin of a kind that sat on my finger. Philip, with his gold and his Stock Exchange and his business generally, does much more curious things than that. But, personally, I do not find them so interesting."

Philip, silent as was his wont when puzzled, instead of rushing into speech, had said nothing. But now he asked a question.

"Of course, it was not a conjuring trick," he said. "That would be futility itself. But you used to have extraordinary hypnotic power, Tom. I only ask – Was that a real nightingale?"

"Quite real."

Evelyn put down his glass untasted.

"I am frightened," he said. "I shall go to bed."

And without more words he bolted into the house.

Philip called good night after him, but there was no response, and he was left alone with the Hermit.

"I am not frightened," he said. "But what on earth does it all mean? Have a drink?"

Tom Merivale laughed quietly.

"It means exactly what I have said," he answered. "Come down to my home sometime, and you shall see. It is all quite simple and quite true. It is all as old as love and as new as love. It is also perfectly commonplace. It must be so. I have only taken the trouble to verify it."

Philip's cool business qualities came to his aid, or his undoing.

"You mean you can convey a message to a bird or a beast?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. Why not? The idea is somehow upsetting to you. Pray don't let it upset you. Nothing that happens can ever be upsetting. It is only the things that don't happen that are such anxieties, for fear they may. But when they have happened they are never alarming."

He pushed his chair back and got up.

"Ah, I have learned one thing in this last year," he said, "and that is to be frightened at nothing. Fear is the one indefensible emotion. You can do nothing at all if you are afraid. You know that yourself in business. But whether you embark on business or on – what shall I call it? – nature-lore, the one thing indispensable is to go ahead. To take your stand firmly on what you know, and deduce from that. Then to test your deduction, and as soon as one will bear your weight to stand on that and deduce again, being quite sure all the time that whatever is true is right. Perhaps

sometime the world in general may see, not degradation in the origin of man from animals, but the extraordinary nobility of it. And then perhaps they will go further back – back to Pagan things, to Pan, the God of nature."

"To see whom meant death," remarked Philip.

"Yes, or life. Death is merely an incident in life. And it seems to me now to be rather an unimportant one. One can't help it. Whereas the important events are those which are within one's control; one's powers of thought, for instance."

Philip rose also.

"And love," he said. "Is that in one's control?"

Tom took a long breath.

"Love?" he said. "It is not exactly in one's control, because it is oneself. There, the dear bird has got home."

And again from the trees below the bubble of liquid melody sounded.

THIRD

EVELYN DUNDAS was sitting next morning after breakfast on the terrace, where what he alluded to as "the nightingale trick" had been performed the evening before, in company with the conjurer who had performed it. Philip and Madge Ellington had just gone down to the river, Lady Ellington who was to have accompanied them having excused herself at the last moment. But since a mother was in closer and more intimate connection with a girl than a mere chaperone, she had seen not the smallest objection to the two going alone. Indeed she had firmly detained Evelyn by a series of questions which required answers, from joining them, and, though deep in a discussion about art, she had dropped it in its most critical state when she judged that the other two had been given time to get under way. It had required, indeed, all her maternal solicitude to continue it so long, for she cared less for art or Evelyn's theories about it than for a week-old paper.

Like most artists, Evelyn had a somewhat egoistic nature, and since his personality was so graceful and interesting, it followed that many people found his talk equally so, especially when he talked about himself. For his egoism he had an admirably probable explanation, and he was at this moment explaining it to Tom Merivale, who had made the soft impeachment with regard to its undoubted existence.

"Ah, yes," he was saying, "an artist's business is not to put things down as they are, but to put them down as they strike him. Actual truth has nothing to do with the value of a landscape. The point is that the picture should be beautiful. And the same with portraits, only beauty there is unnecessary. You have to put down what you think you see, or what you choose to see."

"That shouldn't lead to egoism," remarked Tom. "It should lead you to the study of other people."

Evelyn shook his head.

"No, no," he said, "it leads you to devote yourself entirely almost to the cultivation of your own faculty of seeing. All fine portraits show a great deal of the artist, and perhaps comparatively little of the sitter. Why are Rembrandts so unmistakable? Not because the type of his sitters themselves was almost identical, but because there is lots of Rembrandt in each. You can't have style unless you are egoistic. In fact, for an artist style means egoism. I have heaps. I don't say or pretend it's good, but there it is. Take it or leave it."

Tom Merivale laughed.

"You are perfectly inimitable," he said. "I love your serious, vivid nonsense. That you are an egoist is quite, quite true. But how much better an artist you would be if you weren't. What you want is deepening. You don't like the deeps, you know. You haven't got any. You don't like what you don't understand; that very simple little affair last night, for instance, frightened you."

Egoists are invariably truthful – according to their lights –

about themselves. Evelyn was truthful now.

"Yes, that is so," he said. "I don't pretend to wish to seek out the secrets of the stars. But I know what I like. And I don't like anything that leads into the heart of things. I don't like interiors and symbolism. There is quite enough symbol for me on the surface. What I mean is that the eyebrow itself, the curve of the mouth, will tell you quite as much as one has any use for about the brain that makes the eyebrow frown or the mouth smile. Beauty may be skin deep only, but it is quite deep enough. Skin deep! Why, it is as deep as the sea!"

Tom Merivale was silent a little.

"Do you know, you are an interesting survival of the Pagan spirit?" he said at length.

Evelyn laughed.

"Erect me an altar then at once, and crown me with roses," he remarked. "But what have I said just now that makes you think that?"

"Nothing particular this moment," he answered, "though your remarking that beauty was enough for you is thoroughly Greek in its way. No; what struck me was that never have I seen in you the smallest rudiment or embryo of a conscience or of any moral sense."

Evelyn looked up with real interest at this criticism.

"Oh, that is perfectly true," he said. "Certainly I never have remorse; it must be awful, a sort of moral toothache. All the same, I don't steal or lie, you know."

"Merely because lying and stealing are very inartistic performances," said Tom. "But no idea of morality stands in your way."

Evelyn got up, looking out over the heat-hazed green of the woods below them with his brilliant glance.

"Is that very shocking?" he asked, with perfectly unassumed *naïvetê*.

"I suppose it is. Personally, I am never shocked at anything. But it seems to me very dangerous. You ought to wear a semaphore with a red lamp burning at the end of it."

Evelyn half shut his eyes and put his head on one side.

"I don't think that would compose well," he said.

"That is most consistently spoken," said Tom. "But really, if you are ever in earnest about anything beside your art, you would be a public danger."

Evelyn turned round on this.

"You call me a Pagan," he said. "Well, what are you, pray, with your communings with nature and conjuring tricks with nightingales? You belong to quite as early a form of man."

"I know. I am primeval. At least I hope to be before I die."

"What's the object?"

"In order to see Pan. I am getting on. Come down to the New Forest sometime, and you shall see very odd things, I promise you. Really, Evelyn, I wish you would come. It would do you no end of good."

He got up, and taking the arm of the other man, walked with

him down the terrace.

"You are brilliant, I grant you," he said; "but you are like a mirror, only reflecting things. What you want is to be lit from within. Who is it who talks of the royalty of inward happiness? That is such a true phrase. All happiness from without is not happiness at all; it is only pleasure. And pleasure is always imperfect. It flickers and goes out, it has scratching nails – "

Evelyn shook himself free.

"Ah, let me be," he said. "I don't want anything else. Besides, as you have told me before, you yourself dislike and detest suffering or pain. But how can you hope to understand Nature at all if you leave all that aside? Why, man, the whole of Nature is one groan, one continuous preying of creature on creature. In your life in the New Forest you leave all that out."

Tom Merivale paused.

"I know I do," he said, "because I want to grasp first, once and for all the huge joy that pervades Nature, which seems to me much more vital in itself than pain. It seems to me that pain may be much more rightly called absence of joy than joy be called absence of pain. What the whole thing starts from, the essential spring of the world is not pain and death, but joy and life."

"Ah, there I am with you. But there is so much joy and life on the surface of things that I don't wish to probe down. Ah, Tom, a day like this now; woven webs of blue heat, hot scents from the flower beds, the faces of our friends. Is that not enough? It is for me. And, talking of faces, Miss Ellington has the most

perfectly modelled face I ever saw. The more I look at it, the more it amazes me. I stared at her all breakfast. And the charm of it is its consistent irregularity; not a feature is anything like perfect, but what a whole! I wish I could do her portrait."

Tom laughed.

"There would not be the slightest difficulty about that, I should say," he remarked, "if you promise to present it to her mother."

"Why, of course, I would. How funny it must feel to be hard like that. She is very bruising; I feel that I am being hit in the eye when she talks to me. And she knows how many shillings go to a sovereign."

"Twenty," remarked Tom.

"Ah, that is where you are wrong. She gets twenty-one for each of her sovereigns. And thirteen pence for each of her shillings, and the portrait of her daughter for nothing at all. Oh, Tom, think of it – with a background of something blue, cornflower, forget-me-nots, or lilac, to show how really golden her hair is. There's Mrs. Home."

Evelyn whistled with peculiar shrillness on his fingers to the neat little figure on the croquet lawn below them. She started, not violently, for nothing she did was violent, but very completely.

"Ah, it is only you," she said. "I thought it might be an express train loose. Are you not going on the river, dear Evelyn?"

"I was prevented," he said, jumping down the steps in one flying leap. "Dear Philippina – "

"What next? What next?" murmured Mrs. Home. "Oh, do

behave, Evelyn."

"Well, Philip is your son, so you are Philippina. But why have prize-fighters in your house?"

"Prize-fighters?"

"Yes. Lady Ellington had my head in Chancery for ten minutes just now. She delivered a series of quick-firing questions. I know why, too; it was to prevent my going on the river. She was perfectly successful – I should think she always was successful; she mowed me down. Now will you tell me the truth or not?"

"No, dear Evelyn," said Mrs. Home rather hastily, guessing what was coming.

"Then you are a very wicked woman; but as I now know you are going to tell an untruth, it will do just as well for my purpose. Now, is Philip engaged to Miss Ellington?"

"No, dear; indeed he is not," said Mrs. Home.

"Oh, why not lie better than that?" said Evelyn.

Mrs. Home clasped her white, delicate little hands together.

"Ah, but it is true," she said. "It really is literally true, as far as I know."

Evelyn shook his head at her.

"But they have been gone half an hour," he said. "You mean – I tell you, you mean that they may be now, for all you know."

Mrs. Home turned her pretty, china-blue eyes on to him, with a sort of diminutive air of dignity.

"Of course you are at liberty to put any construction you please on anything I say," she remarked.

"I am," said he, "and I put that. Now, are you pleased at it?"

"She is charming," said Mrs. Home, hopelessly off her guard.

"That is all I wanted to know," said Evelyn. "But what a tangled web you weave, without deceiving me in the least, you old darling."

Tom Merivale had not joined Evelyn, but strolled along the upper walk through herbaceous borders. He had not stayed away from his home now for the past year, and delighted though he was to see these two old friends of his again, he confessed to himself that he found the call on sociability which a visit tacitly implied rather trying. More than that, he found even the presence of other people in the house with whom he was not on terms of intimacy a thing a little upsetting, for his year of solitude had given some justification to his nickname. For solitude is a habit of extraordinary fascination, and very quick to grow on anyone who has sufficient interest in things not to be bored by the absence of people. And with Tom Merivale, Nature, the unfolding of flowers, the lighting of the stars in the sky, the white splendour of the moon, the hiss of the rain on to cowering shrubs and thirsty grass was much more than an interest; it was a passion which absorbed and devoured him. For Nature, to the true devotee, is a mistress far more exacting and far more infinite in her variety and rewards than was ever human mistress to her adorer. Tom Merivale, at any rate, was faithful and wholly constant, and to him now, after a year spent in solitude in which no man had ever felt less alone, no human tie or affection weighed at all compared

to the patient devotion with which he worshipped this ever young mistress of his. To some, indeed, as to Mrs. Home, this cutting of himself off from all other human ties might seem to verge on insanity; to others, as to Philip, it might equally well be construed into an example of perfect sanity. For he had left the world, and cast his moorings loose from society in no embittered or disappointed mood; the severance of his connection with things of human interest had been deliberate and sanely made. He believed, in fact, that what his inner essential self demanded was not to be found among men, or, as he had put it once to Philip, it was to be found there in such small quantities compared to the mass of alloy and undesirable material from which it had to be extracted, that it was false economy to quarry in the world of cities. More than this, too, he had renounced, though this second renunciation had not been deliberate, but had followed, so he found, as a sequel to the other; for he had been a writer of fiction who, though never widely read, had been prized and pored over by a circle of readers whose appreciation was probably far more worth having than that of a wider circle could have been. Then, suddenly, as far as even his most intimate friends knew, he had left London, establishing himself instead in a cottage, of the more comfortable sort of cottages, some mile outside Brockenhurst. In the tea-cup way this had made quite a storm in the set that knew him well, those, in fact, by whom he was valued as an interpreter and a living example of the things of which he wrote. These writings had always been impersonal in note, slightly mystical,

and always with the refrain of Nature running through them. But none, when he disappeared as completely as Waring, suspected how vital to himself his disappearance had been. Anything out of the way is labelled, and rightly by the majority, to be insane. By such a verdict Tom Merivale certainly merited Bedlam. He had gone away, in fact, to think, while the majority of those who crowd into the cities do so, not to think, but to be within reach of the distractions that leave no time for thought. For action is always less difficult than thought; a man can act for more hours a day than he can think in a week, and action, being a productive function of the brain, is thus (rightly, also, from the social point of view) considered the more respectable employment.

The subject of this difficult doctrine, however, was more than content; as he had said, he was happy, a state far on the sunward side of the other. He seemed to himself, indeed, to be sitting very much awake and alert on some great sunlit slope of the world, untenanted by man, but peopled with a million natural marvels unconjectured as yet by the world, but which slowly coming into the ken of his wondering and patient eyes. For a year now he had consciously and solely devoted himself to the study and contemplation of life, that eternal and ever-renewed life of Nature, and the joy manifested therein. He had turned his back with the same careful deliberation on all that is painful in Nature, all suffering, all that hinders and mars the fulness of life, on everything, in fact, which is an evidence of imperfection. In this to a large extent he was identically minded with Christian

Scientists, but having faced the central idea of Christianity, namely, the suffering which was necessary as atonement for sin, he had confessed himself unable to accept, at present at any rate, the possibility of suffering being ever necessary, and could no longer call himself a Christian. Happiness was his gospel, and the book in which he studied it was Nature, omitting always such chapters as dealt with man. For man, so it seemed to him, had by centuries of evolution built himself into something so widely different from Nature's original design, that the very contemplation of and association with man was a thing to be avoided. Absence of serenity, absence of happiness, seemed the two leading characteristics of the human race, whereas happiness and serenity were the chief of those things for which he sought and for which he lived.

This year's solitude and quest for joy had already produced in him remarkable results. He had been originally himself of a very high-strung, nervous, and irritable temperament; now, however, he could not imagine the event which should disturb his equanimity. For this, as far as it went alone, he was perfectly willing to accept the possible explanation that a year's life in the open air had wrought its simple miracle of healing on his nerves, and, as he had said to Lady Ellington, the perfection of health had eliminated the possibility of discontent.

But other phenomena did not admit of quite so obvious an interpretation; and it was on these that he based his belief that, though all that occurred must necessarily be natural, following,

that is to say, laws of nature, he was experiencing the effects of laws which were to the rest of the world occult or unknown. For in a word, youth, with all its vivid vigour, its capacity for growth and expansion, had returned to him in a way unprecedented; his face, as Evelyn had noticed, had grown younger, and in a hundred merely corporeal ways he had stepped back into early manhood. Again, and this was more inexplicable, he had somehow established, without meaning to, a certain communion with birds and beasts, of which the "nightingale trick" had been a small instance, which seemed to him must be a direct and hitherto unknown effect of his conscious absorption of himself in Nature. How far along this unexplored path he would be able to go he had no idea; he guessed, however, that he had at present taken only a few halting steps along a road that was lost in a golden haze of wonder.

He strolled along out through the garden into a solitary upland of bush-besprinkled turf. Wild flowers of downland, the rock-rose, the harebell, orchids, and meadow-sweet carpeted the short grass, and midsummer held festival. But this morning his thoughts were distracted from the Nature-world in which he lived, and he found himself dwelling on the human beings among whom for a few days he would pass his time. It was natural from the attitude of this last year that Evelyn Dundas and Mrs. Home should be of the party in the house the most congenial to him, and the simplicity of them both seemed to him far more interesting than the greater complexity of the others. It would,

it is true, be hard to find two examples of simplicity so utterly unlike each other, but serene absence of calculation or scheming brought both under one head. They were both, in a way, children of Nature; Mrs. Home on the one hand having arrived at her inheritance by cheerful, unswerving patience and serenity with events external to herself; while in the case of the other, his huge vitality, coupled with his extreme impressionableness to beauty, brought him, so it seemed to Tom Merivale, into very close connection with the essentials of life. But, as he had told his friend, Evelyn's attitude to life was instinctively Pagan; immoral he was not, for his fastidiousness labelled such a thing ugly, but he had apparently no rudiments even of conscience or sense of moral obligation. And somehow, with that curious sixth sense of prescience, so common in animals, so rare among civilized human beings who, by means of continued calculation and reasoned surmise of the future, which has caused it to wither and atrophize, Tom felt, just as he could feel approaching storms, a vague sense of coming disaster.

The sensation was very undefined, but distinctly unpleasant, and, following his invariable rule to divert his mind from all unpleasantness, he lay down on the short turf and buried his face in a great bed of thyme which grew there. All summer was in that smell, hot, redolent, the very breath of life, and with eyes half-closed and nostrils expanded he breathed it deeply in.

The place he had come to was very remote and solitary, a big clearing in the middle of trees, well known to him in earlier

years. No road crossed it, no house lay near it, but the air was resonant with the labouring bees, and the birds called and fluted to each other in the trees. But suddenly, as he lay there, half lost in a stupor of happiness, he heard very faintly another noise, to which at first he paid but little attention. It was the sound apparently of a flute being played at some great distance off, but what soon arrested his attention was the extremely piercing character of the notes. Remote as the sound was, and surrounded as he was by the hundred noises of the summer noon, it yet seemed to him perfectly clear and distinct through them all. Then something further struck him, for phrase after phrase of delicious melody was poured out, yet the same phrase was never repeated, nor did the melody come to an end; on the top of every climax came another; it was a tune unending, eternal, and whether it came from earth or heaven, from above or below, he could not determine, for it seemed to come from everywhere equally; it was as universal as the humming of the bees.

Then suddenly a thought flashed into his mind; he sprang up, and a strange look of fear crossed his face. At the same instant the tune ceased.

FOURTH

IT was not in Lady Ellington's nature to be enthusiastic, since she considered enthusiasm to be as great a waste of the emotional fibres as anger, but she was at least thoroughly satisfied when, two evenings after this, Madge came to her room before dinner after another punting expedition with Philip, and gave her news.

"It is quite charming," said her mother, "and you have shown great good sense. Dear child, I must kiss you. And where is Mr. Home – Philip I must call him now?"

"He is outside," said Madge. "I said I would go down again for a few minutes before dinner."

Lady Ellington got up and kissed her daughter conscientiously, first on one cheek and then on the other.

"I will come down with you," she said, "just to tell him how very much delighted I am. I shall have to have a long talk to him to-morrow morning."

There was no reason whatever why the engagement should not be announced at once, and in consequence congratulations descended within the half hour. Mrs. Home was a little tearful, with tears of loving happiness on behalf of her son, which seemed something of a weakness to Lady Ellington; Tom Merivale was delighted in a sort of faraway manner that other people should be happy; Evelyn Dundas alone, in spite of his previous preparation for the news, felt somehow slightly

pulled up. For with his complete and instinctive surrender to every mood of the moment, he had permitted himself to take great pleasure in the contemplation – it was really hardly more than that – of Madge's beauty, and he felt secretly, for no shadow obscured the genuineness of his congratulations, a certain surprise and sense of being ill-used. He was not the least in love with Madge, but even in so short a time they had fallen into ways of comradeship, and her engagement, he felt, curtailed the liberties of that delightful relationship. And again this evening, having cut out of a bridge table, he wandered with her in the perfect dusk. Lady Ellington this time observed their exit, but cheerfully permitted it; no harm could be done now. It received, in fact, her direct and conscious sanction, since Philip had suggested to Madge that Evelyn should paint her portrait. He knew that Evelyn was more than willing to do so, and left the arrangement of sitting to sitter and artist. In point of fact, it was this subject that occupied the two as they went out.

"We shall be in London for the next month, Mr. Dundas," Madge was saying, "and of course I will try to suit your convenience. It is so good of you to say you will begin it at once."

Evelyn's habitual frankness did not desert him.

"Ah, I must confess, then," he said. "It isn't at all good of me. You see, I want to paint you, and I believe I can. And I will write to-morrow to a terrible railway director to say that in consequence of a subsequent engagement I cannot begin the – the delineation of his disgusting features for another month."

Madge laughed; as is the way of country-house parties, the advance in intimacy had been very rapid.

"Oh, that would be foolish," she said. "Delineate his disgusting features if you have promised. My disgusting features will wait."

"Ah, but that is just what they won't do," said Evelyn.

"Do you mean they will go bad, like meat in hot weather? Thank you so much."

"My impression will go bad," said he. "No, I must paint you at once. Besides" – and still he was perfectly frank – "besides Philip is, I suppose, my oldest friend. He has asked me to do it, and friendship comes before cheques."

They walked in silence a little while.

"I am rather nervous," said Madge. "I watched you painting this afternoon for a bit."

"Oh, a silly sketch," said he, "flowers, terrace, woods behind; it was only a study for a background."

"Well, it seemed to affect you. You frowned and growled, and stared and bit the ends of your brushes. Am I going to be stuck up on a platform to be growled at and stared at? I don't think I could stand it; I should laugh."

Evelyn nodded his head in strong approval.

"That will be what I want," he said. "I will growl to any extent if it will make you laugh. I shall paint you laughing, laughing at all the ups and downs of the world. I promise you you shall laugh. With sad eyes, too," he added. "Did you know you had sad eyes?"

Madge slightly entrenched herself at this.

"I really haven't studied my own expression," she said. "Women are supposed to use mirrors a good deal, but they use them, I assure you, to see if their hair is tidy."

"Your's never is quite," said he. "And it suits you admirably."

Again the gravel sounded crisply below their feet, without the overscore of human voices.

Then he spoke again.

"And please accept my portrait of you as my wedding present to you – and Philip," he said with boyish abruptness.

Madge for the moment was too utterly surprised to speak.

"But, Mr. Dundas," she said at length, "I can't – I – how can I?"

He laughed.

"Well, I must send it to Philip, then," he said, "if you won't receive it. But – why should you not? You are going to marry my oldest friend. I can't send him an ivory toothbrush."

This reassured her.

"It is too kind of you," said she. "I had forgotten that. So send it to him."

"Certainly. But help me to make it then as good as I can."

"Tell me how?" she asked, feeling inexplicably uneasy.

"Why, laugh," he said. "That is how I see you. You laugh so seldom, and you might laugh so often. Why don't you laugh oftener?"

Then an impulse of simple honesty came to her.

"Because I am usually bored," she said.

"Ah, you really mustn't be bored while I am painting you," he

said. “I could do nothing with it if you were bored. Besides, it would be so uncharacteristic.”

“How is that, when I am bored so often?” she asked.

“Oh, it isn’t the things we do often that are characteristic of us,” said he. “It is the things we do eagerly, with intention.”

She laughed at this.

“Then you are right,” she said. “I am never eagerly bored. And to tell you the truth, I don’t think I shall be bored when I sit to you. Ah, there is Philip. He does not see us; I wonder whether he will?”

Philip’s white-fronted figure had appeared at this moment at the French window leading out of the drawing-room, and his eyes, fresh from the bright light inside, were not yet focussed to the obscurity of the dusk. At that moment Madge found herself suddenly wishing that he would go back again. But as soon as she was conscious she wished that, she resolutely stifled the wish and called to him.

“Evelyn there, too?” he asked. “Evelyn, you’ve got to go in and take my place.”

“And you will take mine,” said he with just a shade of discontent in his voice.

“No, my dear fellow,” said Philip. “I shall take my own.”

He laughed.

“I congratulate you again,” he said, and left them.

Philip stood for a moment in silence by the girl, looking at her with a sort of shy, longing wonder.

"Ah, what luck!" he said at length. "What stupendous and perfect luck."

"What is luck, Philip?" she asked.

"Why, this. You and me. Think of the chances against my meeting you in this big world, and think of the chances against your saying 'Yes.' But now – now that it has happened it couldn't have been otherwise."

Some vague, nameless trouble took possession of the girl, and she shivered slightly.

"You are cold, my darling?" he said quickly.

She had been leaning against the stone balustrade of the terrace, but stood upright, close to him.

"No, not in the least," she said.

"What is it, then?" he asked.

"It is nothing. Only I suppose I feel it is strange that in a moment the whole future course of one's life is changed like this."

He took her hands in his, and the authentic fire of love burned in his eyes.

"Strange?" he said. "Is it not the most wonderful of miracles? I never knew anything so wonderful could happen. It makes all the rest of my life seem dim. There is just this one huge beacon of light. All the rest is in shadow."

She raised her face to him half imploringly.

"Oh, Philip, is it all that to you?" she asked. "I – I am afraid."

"Because you have made me the happiest man alive?"

A sudden, inevitable impulse of honesty prompted Madge to speak out.

"No, but because I have perhaps meddled with great forces about which I know nothing. I like you immensely; I have never liked anyone so much. I esteem you and respect you. I am quite willing to lead the rest of my life with you; I want nothing different. But will that do? Is that enough? I have never loved as I believe you love me. I do not think it is possible to me. There, I have told you."

Philip raised her hands to his lips and kissed them.

"Ah, my dearest, you give me all you have and are, and yet you say, 'Is that enough?'" he whispered. "What more is possible?"

She looked at him a moment, the trouble not yet quite gone from her face. Then she raised it to his.

"Then take it," she said.

The night was very warm and windless, and for some time longer they walked up and down, or stood resting against the terrace wall looking down over the hushed woods. A nightingale, the same perhaps that had been charmed to Tom's finger two evenings ago, poured out liquid melody, and the moon began to rise in the East. Gradually their talk veered to other subjects, and Madge mentioned that Evelyn was willing to do her portrait.

"He will begin at once," she said, "because it appears his impression of me isn't a thing that will keep. He is putting off another order for it."

"That is dreadfully immoral," said Philip, "but I am delighted

to hear it."

"Oh, and another thing. He gives it us – to you and me I think he said – as a wedding present."

"Ah, I can't have that," said Philip quickly. "That is Evelyn all over. There never was such an unthinking, generous fellow. But it is quite impossible. Why, it would mean a sixth part of his year's income."

"I know; I felt that."

Philip laughed rather perplexedly.

"I really don't know what is to be done with him," he said. "Last year he gave my mother a beautiful pearl brooch. That sort of thing is so embarrassing. And if she had not accepted it, he would have been quite capable of throwing it into the Thames. Indeed he threatened to do so. And he will be equally capable of throwing his cheque into the fire."

"All the same, I like it enormously," she said; "his impulse, I mean."

"I know, but it offends my instincts as a man of business. I might just as well refuse to charge interest on loans. However, I will see what I can do."

They went in again soon after this, for it was growing late, and found Lady Ellington preparing to leave the table of her very complete conquests. It had fallen to Evelyn to provide her with a no-trump hand containing four aces, and she was disposed to be gracious. The news, furthermore, that he would begin her daughter's portrait at once was gratifying to her, and she was

anxious that the sittings should begin at once. As both they and he would be in town for the next month, the matter was easily settled, and it was arranged that the thing should be put in hand immediately.

Philip followed Evelyn to the billiard-room as soon as the women went upstairs, and found him alone there.

"The Hermit has gone to commune with Nature," he said. "He will die of natural causes if he doesn't look out. He called me a Pagan this morning, Philip. Wasn't it rude? And the fact that it is true seems to me to make it ruder."

Philip lit his cigarette.

"I'm going to be rude too, old chap," said he. "Evelyn, you really mustn't make a present of the portrait to Madge and me. It is awfully good of you, and just like you, but I simply couldn't accept it."

Evelyn shrugged his shoulders.

"Then there will be no portrait at all," he said shortly. "I tell you I won't paint it as an order."

Philip held out his hand.

"I appreciate it tremendously," he said. "It is most awfully good of you. But it's your profession. Hullo, here's the Hermit back."

Tom Merivale entered at this moment.

"Aren't we going to sit out to-night?" he said.

Evelyn rose.

"Yes, let's go out," he said. "Well, Philip, not a line will I draw

unless you take it. Or I'll give it to Miss Ellington and not you."

"You really musn't," said Philip.

"But don't you see I want to paint her? I said so to you only the other day. Hang it all, I tell you that I do it for pleasure. I shall also be the vast gainer artistically. I've got an idea about her, in fact, and if you don't let me paint her I shall do it from memory, in which case it will not be so good."

An idea struck Philip.

"Well, paint me as well," he said, "and let me pay you for that."

Evelyn followed Tom out.

"Oh, I can't haggle," he said. "Yes, I'll paint you if you like. But I will paint Miss Ellington first. In fact, you shall be painted when I've nothing else to do. Well, Hermit, seen Pan to-day?"

"No, you scoffer," said Tom.

"Call me when you do. I should like to see him, too. Let's see, he was a man with goat's legs; sort of things you see in Barnum's."

Tom shifted in his chair.

"Some day, perhaps, you may think it serious," he said.

"I daresay; a man with goat's legs is not to be taken lightly," said Evelyn. "And he sits by the roadside, doesn't he, or so Browning says, playing the pipes? What pipes, I wonder? Bagpipes, do you suppose?"

Tom laughed; his equanimity was quite undisturbed even by chaff upon what was to him the most serious subject in the world.

"Ah, who was frightened at a nightingale coming to sit on my finger a few nights ago? Evelyn, if you are not serious, I'll frighten

you again."

"Well, but is it bagpipes?" asked he.

Tom suddenly got grave.

"No, it sounded more like a glass flute very far off," he said. "No explanations are forthcoming, because I haven't got any."

Evelyn was silent a moment.

"And when did you hear this glass flute very far off?" he asked.

"Two mornings ago, up above the house in that big clearing in the woods," he answered. "I know nothing more about it. It frightened me rather, and then it stopped."

"What did it play?" asked Philip.

"A world-without-end tune," he said. "The catechising is now over. I shall go to bed, I think. I must leave to-morrow, Philip."

"I hoped you would stop a day or two longer. Must you really go?"

"I must, I find."

"Appointment with Pan in the New Forest," remarked Evelyn, dodging the cushion that was thrown at him.

Philip had to spend the inside of the next day in London, and left with Tom Merivale by an early train, leaving Evelyn alone with his mother, Lady Ellington, and Madge. It came about very naturally that Lady Ellington gravitated to Mrs. Home, and Evelyn, finishing his background sketch in front of a great clump of purple clematis, found Madge on the terrace when he went out, with an unopened book on her lap.

The book had lain there, indeed, in the same state for half an hour before he came, for Madge had been very fully occupied with her own thoughts. She had had a talk to her mother the night before, which this morning seemed to her to be more revealing of herself than even her own confession to Philip in their stroll on the terrace had been. She had told her just what she had told him, namely, that she gave him very willingly all that she knew of herself, liking, esteem, respect, adding out of Philip's mouth that this more than contented him. But then Lady Ellington, for the first time perhaps for many years, had made a strategical error, allowing her emotion, not her reason, to dictate to her, and had said —

"Ah, Madge, how clever of you."

She had seen her mistake a moment afterwards, and just a moment too late, for Madge had asked the very simple question "Why?" And the unsatisfactory nature of her mother's reply had given her food for thought.

For Lady Ellington had applauded as clever what was to her the very rudiment of honour, and she had supposed that her mother would say "How very stupid of you." Clearly, then, while extremely uncalculating to herself, Madge had succeeded in giving the impression of calculation to one who, she well knew, calculated. What, then, she asked herself, was the secret of this love of which she was ignorant, that rendered her confession of ignorance so satisfactory a reply?

Effusive pleasure on her mother's part at the termination of

this recital had not consoled her. Somehow, according to Lady Ellington's view, an almost quixotic honesty appeared clever. And it was over this riddle that she was puzzling when Evelyn appeared, with brilliance, so to speak, streaming from him. Brilliance certainly streamed from his half-finished sketch, and brilliance marked his exposition of it.

"Oh, I lead a dog's life," he said, as he planted his easel down on the gravel. "Do you know Lady Taverner, for whom this is to be a background? No? I congratulate you. She is pink, simply pink, like a phlox, with butter-coloured hair, probably acquired. Well, put a pat of butter and a phlox on a purple plate, and you will see that the phlox is pinker than ever and the butter more buttery. Therefore, since I really am very thorough, I make a sketch of clematis to see how the flowers really grow, and shall plaster her with them – masses behind her, sapphires round her neck; and a pink Jewess in the middle," he added, in a tone of extraordinary irritation.

Madge let her book slide to the ground.

"Do you want to be talked to or not?" she asked. "If you don't, say so, and I will go away."

Evelyn looked up from his purple clematis.

"I lead a dog's life," he said, "but sometimes somebody throws me a bone. So throw me one."

"You seem to growl over it," said she.

"I know I do. That is because, though I lead a dog's life, nobody shall take my bone from me."

He bit the end of his brush.

"And the filthy thing casts purple shadows upwards," he said. "At least the sun shines on the purple, and reflects the purple on leaves that overhang it. I wish I had been born without any sense of colour. I should have made such ripping etchings."

Madge had no immediate reply to this, and he painted for some ten minutes in silence. She had picked up her book again, and read the words of it – reading it could not be called.

"You haven't given me many bones," said he at length.

Madge looked up.

"I know I haven't," she said; "but seriously I considered if I had got anything to say, and found I hadn't. So I decided to say nothing."

Evelyn dabbed in a purple star.

"But surely one has always something in one's mind," he said. "One can't help that, so why not say it? A penny for your thoughts now."

Madge laughed.

"No, they are worth far more. In fact, they are not in the market," she said.

Evelyn grew portentously grave.

"Mrs. Gummidge," he said.

"Oh, what do you mean?" she asked.

"You've been thinking of the old one," said Evelyn. "Philip."

"Quite true, I was," she said. "He is such a dear."

"So glad you like him," muttered Evelyn, again frowning and

biting his brushes. “Lord love us, what a blue world it is this morning! There, I can’t paint any more just now.”

“That’s rather sudden, isn’t it?”

“Oh, I always stop like that,” said Evelyn. “I go on painting and painting, and then suddenly somebody turns a tap off in my head, and I’ve finished. I can’t see any more, and I couldn’t paint if I did. I suppose the day will come when the tap will be turned permanently off. Shortly afterwards I shall be seen to jump off Westminster Bridge. I only hope nobody will succeed in rescuing me.”

“I will try to remember if I happen to be there,” said she.

Evelyn put his sketch to dry in the shadow of the terrace wall.

“The law is so ridiculous,” he said. “They punish you if you don’t succeed in committing suicide when you try to, and say you are temporarily insane if you do. Whereas the bungler is probably far more deranged than the man who does the job properly.”

“I shall never commit suicide,” said Madge with conviction.

“Ah, wait till you care about anything as much as I care about painting,” said Evelyn, “and then contemplate living without it. Why, I should cease without it. The world would be no longer possible; it wouldn’t, so to speak, hold water.”

“Ah, do you really feel about it like that?” said she. “Tell me what it’s like, that feeling.”

Evelyn laughed.

“You ought to know,” he said, “because I imagine it’s like being permanently in love.”

Here was as random an arrow as was ever let fly; he had been unconscious of even drawing his bow, but to his unutterable surprise it went full and straight to its mark. The girl's face went suddenly expressionless, as if a lamp within had been turned out, and she rose quickly, with a half-stifled exclamation.

"Ah, what nonsense we are talking," she said quickly.

Evelyn looked at her in genuine distress at having unwittingly caused her pain.

"Why, of course we are," he said. "How people can talk sense all day beats me. They must live at such high pressure. Personally I preserve any precious grains of sense I may have, and put them into my pictures. Some of my pictures simply bristle with sense."

The startled pain had not died out of Madge's eyes, but she laughed, and Evelyn, looking at her, gave a little staccato exclamation.

"And what is it now?" she asked.

"Why, you – you laughed with sad eyes. You were extraordinarily like what my picture will be at that moment."

The girl glanced away. That sudden, unexplained little stab of pain she had experienced had left her nervous. Her whole nature had winced under it, and, like a man who feels some sudden moment of internal agony for the first time, she was frightened; she did not know what it meant.

"I expect that is nonsense, too," she said. "At least, it is either nonsense or very obvious, for I suppose when anyone laughs, however fully he laughs, there is always something tragic behind.

Ah, how nice to laugh entirely just once from your hair to your heels."

"Can't you do that ever?" asked Evelyn sympathetically.

"No, never, nor can most people, I think. We are all haunted houses; there is always a ghost of some kind tapping at the door or lurking in the dusk. Only a few people have no ghosts. I should think your's were infinitesimal. You are much to be envied."

Evelyn listened with all his ears to this; partly because he and Madge were already such good friends, and anything new about her was interesting; partly because, though, as he had said, surface was enough for him – it bore so very directly on his coming portrait of her.

"Yes, I expect that is true," he said; "most people certainly have their ghosts. But it is wise to wall up one's haunted room, is it not?"

Madge shook her head.

"Yes, but it is still there," she said.

She got up from the low chair in which she was sitting with an air of dismissing the subject of their talk.

"Come, ask me some more of those very silly riddles," she said. "I think they are admirable in laying ghosts. So, too, are you, Mr. Dundas. I am sure you will not resent it when I say it is because you are so frightfully silly. Ghosts cannot stand silliness."

Evelyn laughed.

"It is so recuperative to be silly," he said, "because it requires no effort to a person of silly disposition, that is to say. One has

to be oneself. How easy!"

She opened her eyes at this.

"That means you find it easy to be natural," she said. "Why, I should have thought that was almost the most difficult thing in the world to be. Now a pose is easy; it is like acting; you have got to be somebody else. But to be oneself! One has to know what one is, first of all, one has to know what one likes."

Evelyn laughed again.

"Not at all. You just have to shut your eyes, take a long breath, and begin talking. Whatever you say is you."

The girl shook her head.

"Ah, you don't understand," she said. "You, you, I, everybody, are really all sorts of people put into one envelope. Am I to say what one piece of me is prompting me to say or what another is thinking about? And it's just the same with one's actions; one hardly ever does a thing which every part of one wants to do; one's actions, just like one's words, are a sort of compromise between the desires of one's different components."

She paused a moment, and, with a woman's quickness of intuition provided against that which might possibly be in his mind.

"Of course, when a big choice comes," she said, "one's whole being has to consent. But one only has half a dozen of those in one's life, I expect."

She had guessed quite rightly, for the idea of her marriage had inevitably suggested itself to Evelyn when she said "one hardly

ever does a thing which every part of one wants to do." But in the addition she had made to her speech there was even a more direct allusion to it, which necessarily cancelled from his mind the first impression. He was bound, in fact, to accept her last word. But he fenced a little longer.

"I don't see that one choice can really be considered bigger than another," he said. "The smallest choice may have the hugest consequences which one could never have foretold, because they are completely outside one's own control. I may, for instance, settle to go up to London to-morrow by the morning train or the later one. Well, that seems a small enough choice, but supposing one train has a frightful accident? What we can control is so infinitesimal compared to what lies outside us – engine-drivers, bullets, anything that may kill."

The girl shuddered slightly.

"It is all so awful," she said, "that. An ounce of lead, a fall, and one is extinguished. It is so illogical, too."

"Ah, anything that happens to one's body, or mind either, is that," said Evelyn.

"How? Surely one is responsible for what happens to one's mind."

"Yes, in the way of learning ancient history, if we choose, or having drawing-lessons. But all the big things that can happen to one are outside one's control. Love, hate, falling in love particularly is, I imagine, completely independent of one's will."

The girl gave a short, rather scornful laugh.

"But one sees a determined effort to marry someone," she said, "often productive of a very passable imitation of falling in love."

Had she boxed his ears, Evelyn could not have been more astonished. If this was an example of shutting the eyes; drawing a long breath and being natural, he felt that there was after all something to be said for the artificialities in which we are most of us wont to clothe ourselves. There was a very Marah of bitterness in the girl's tone; he felt, too, as if all the time she had concealed her hand, so to speak, behind her back, and suddenly thrown a squib at him, an explosive that cracked and jumped and jerked in a thoroughly disconcerting manner. And she read the blankness of his face aright, and hastened to correct the impression she had made.

"Did you ever get behind a door when you were a child," she asked, "and jump out calling 'Bo!'? That is what I did just then, and it was a complete success."

He looked at her a moment with his head on one side, as if studying an effect.

"But it was you who jumped out?" he asked rather pertinently.

"Ah, I wouldn't even say that," said she. "I think it was only a turnip-ghost that I had stuck behind the door."

Evelyn gave a sort of triumphant shout of laughter.

"Well, for the moment it took me in," he said. "I really thought it was you."

FIFTH

THE season in London this year had been particularly amusing; there had been a quite unusually large number of balls, the opera had been one perpetual coruscation of evening stars that sang together, the conduct of May and early June from a meteorological point of view had been impeccable, and in consequence when the world in general came back after Whitsuntide they came for the most part with a pleasurable sense of returning for the second act of a play of which the first had been really enchanting. Like taking one's seat again for a play was the sense that various unfinished situations which had been left in an interesting stage would now move forward to their dramatic climaxes. One, however – this was rather unfair – had developed itself to a happy close in the country, and Madge Ellington's engagement to Philip was generally pronounced to be very nice indeed. On both sides, indeed, it was very nice; for it had not been seemly that a millionaire should be unmarried so long, and on the other hand it had not been seemly that Madge should be unmarried so long. But now they had both seen the error of their ways, and had agreed to marry each other.

And above all, it was very nice for Lady Ellington, about whom it was generally known that she had made a considerable sum in speculation lately. To do that was universally recognised as being an assured advance towards the bankruptcy court, but

to have captured a wealthy son-in-law who was a magnate in the South African market turned her steps, or might be hoped to turn them, away from the direction of the courts, and point instead towards the waters of comfort and cash. Another thing that excited to some extent the attention and applause of the world was a certain change of demeanor in Madge, which was very noticeable after her return to London from the Whitsuntide holiday. She had always been rather given to put her head in the air, and appear not to notice people; but her engagement had brought to her an added geniality. Hitherto she had been something of "a maid on yonder mountain height," but the shepherd, Philip Home, had, it appeared, convinced her that "love was of the valley," and she had quite distinctly come down. This, at any rate, was the conclusion at which Gladys Ellington, the present Lady Ellington, arrived within two minutes of the time when she met Madge next.

She was of about Madge's own age, and the two, in spite of old Lady Ellington's rooted dislike to her nephew, had always been friends. Gladys was charmingly pretty, most successful in all she did, and universally liked. This was only fair, for she took immense trouble to be liked, and never did an ill-natured thing to anyone, unless it was quite certain that she would not be found out. She had come to tea on the afternoon succeeding Madge's return to London, and, though she professed regrets at the absence of Madge's mother, was really delighted to find her friend alone. She had a perfect passion for finding things out,

and her method of doing so was to talk with extreme volubility herself, so that no one could possibly conjecture that she had any object of the sort in her mind. But her pauses were well calculated, and her questions few, while with regard to these, she always gave the appearance of not attending to the answers, which further disarmed suspicion. She was, however, a little afraid of Madge's mother, who always gave her the idea of seeing through her. This made her volubility a little threadbare at times, and consequently she bore her absence with more than equanimity.

"Darling, I think it is too charming," she was saying, "and I always hoped that you would do just this. Mr. Home is perfectly adorable, I think, and though it sounds horribly worldly to say so, it is an advantage, you know, to marry a very rich man. We're as poor as mice, you see, and so I know. Yes, please – a cup of tea, though we're told now that a cup of tea is the most unwholesome thing in the world. And you had a nice party? Mrs. Home, too, just like a piece of china scented with lavender. And who else was there?"

"Only two more men," said Madge, "Mr. Merivale and Mr. Evelyn Dundas."

"The Hermit of the New Forest!" cried Gladys, directing her remarks to him because she wished to hear more of the other. "How too exciting! He lives on cherry jam and brown bread, does he not, and whistles to the cows, who lay their heads on his shoulder and purr. I used to know him in the old days before he

was a hermit at all. And Mr. Dundas, too! Do you like him?"

"Yes, very much, very much indeed," said Madge gravely. "He is such a child, you know, and he makes one laugh because he is so silly. He is going to do my portrait, by the way; mine and Philip's."

"How delightful! He ought to make a really wonderful thing of you, dear Madge. Do tell me, how much does he charge? I'm dying to be painted by him, but he is so frightfully expensive, is he not? And you liked him; what a good thing, as you are going to sit to him. It must be awful being painted by a man who irritates you."

Madge laughed.

"He doesn't irritate me in the slightest," she said. "In fact, I don't think I ever got to know a man so quickly. I don't know how it is; somehow he is like clear water. You can see straight to the bottom."

Gladys regarded her rather closely as she nibbled with rather a bird-like movement at a sugared bun.

"Madge, you've quite changed," she said. "You are actually beginning to take an interest in your fellow-creatures. That is so wise of you. Of course Evelyn Dundas is adorable; I'm hopelessly in love with him myself, but I should have thought he was just the sort of man who would not have interested you in the least. Nor would he have a few weeks ago. Dearest, you've stepped down from your pedestal, where you really used to be rather a statue, you know, like Galatea, and it does improve you so. I saw it the

moment I came into the room. And just falling in love has done it all."

A sudden look of pain came over Madge's face, and her companion, with a well-chosen pause, waited for her to express it in words.

"Ah, Gladys, are you sure you are right?" she said. "Because I think I must tell you this even as I told Philip – I don't feel as if I had fallen in love. I like him, I esteem and respect him, but – but it isn't what I expected. I'm not – I hate the word – but I'm not thrilled."

Gladys rustled sympathetically, and Madge went on:

"I had it all out with my mother, too," she said, "who very sensibly said that as I had lived twenty-five years without falling in love in that sort of sense, I was very unlikely to begin now. On the other hand, she said that it was much better that I should be married than remain single. And so I am going to marry Philip Home."

Again Gladys rustled sympathetically, and gave a murmured "Yes," for Madge evidently had more to say.

"Anyhow, I have been honest with him," she said, "and I have told him that. And he seems to think that it can easily form the basis for happiness, and accepts it. But tell me, am I frightfully cold-blooded? And have I any right to marry him?"

Gladys' quick little brain had hopped over a dozen aspects of this question, and pecked, so to speak, at a dozen different fruits, while Madge was speaking; but with a whirr of wings she was

back again, up to time as usual.

"No, not the least cold-blooded, and you have every right to marry him," she said. "For you may be quite sure that you soon will be in love with him, because I assure you that already it has made an enormous difference in you. How do I know that? I can't possibly tell you, any more than you can tell exactly why a person looks ill. You say her face looks drawn. What's drawn? Why, the same as ill. You've woke up, dearest; you've come to life. Life! there's nothing in the world so good as that."

Madge leaned forward, and spoke more eagerly.

"Yes, you're right," she said, "though I don't know that your reason is right I have somehow come to life. But it puzzles me a little to know how it has happened, or why."

Gladys nodded her head with an air of wisdom, and got up. At this time of the year she seldom spent more than an hour in any one place, and still more seldom with only one person, and both Madge and Madge's house had now enjoyed their full share of her time.

"Ah, I am very bad at riddles," she said, "and, besides, none of us know 'why' about anything, and, on the whole, reasons and motives matter very little. Things that happen are so numerous and so interesting that one has literally not time to probe into them and ask how and why. And after all, dear, when anything so very nice has happened as your engagement, which too has brought such a gain to you in yourself, I am more than content, and so should you be, to accept that as it is. Now, I must simply

fly; I am dining out and going to the opera, and to a dance afterwards. What a pity there are not forty-eight hours in every day."

This regret was subsequently shared by Madge herself, who found that the life of a young woman who is going to be married in six weeks' time, for the wedding had been fixed for the end of July, implies a full engagement book. And in addition to the ordinary calls on her time, hours were further claimed from her by Evelyn Dundas, who apparently had insisted to another sitter on the prior rights of this subsequent engagement, and announced himself free to begin her portrait at once, to give her sittings whenever she could sit, and finish it as quickly as his powers of brush would permit him. His impetuousness, as usual, swept away all difficulties, and before a fortnight had elapsed, Madge had already given him four sittings, and the picture itself was beginning to live and breathe on his canvas.

These sittings, or rather the artist's manners and moods during them, were strangely various. Sometimes for half-an-hour, as Madge complained, he would do nothing but stare at her, grunting to himself, and biting the ends of his brushes. Then in a moment all would be changed, and instead of staring and grunting with idle hands, he would glance at her and record, record and glance again, absorbed in the passion of his creation, whistling sometimes gently to himself, or at other times silent, but with a smiling mouth. Then that wind of inspiration that bloweth where it listeth would leave him again, and he would

declare roundly that he did not know what she was like, or what his picture was like, but that the only thing quite certain was that his picture was not like her. Then, even while these gloomy announcements were on his lips, even in the middle of a sentence, he would murmur to himself, "Oh, I see," and the swish of the happy brush would alone break the silence. At other times there was no silence to break, and from the time she stepped up on to the platform till when she left it, he would pour out a perfect flood of inconsequent nonsense. Or, again, the hours passed in unbroken conversation between the two, the talk sometimes flitting like a butterfly over all the open flowers of life, but at other times, as it had done once or twice at Philip's house, dropping suddenly into the heart of things, finding sometimes honey there, but sometimes shadows only.

A sitting of this latter kind had just come to an end, and Evelyn, after seeing his sitter into her carriage, had returned to his studio, still palette in hand, meaning to work for an hour at the background. Certainly in this short space of time he had made admirable progress, and he knew within himself that this was to be a landmark of his work, and up to the present, at any rate, his high-water mark. He had drawn the girl standing very upright, as was her wont, but with head a little thrown back, and her face, eyes, and mouth alike laughed. It was a daring conception, but the happiness of the execution was worthy of it, and the fore-shortening of the face owing to the throw-back of the head, the drawing, too, of the open mouth and of the half-closed eyes

was a triumph. Her figure was shown in white evening dress, with hands locked together, carrying a feather fan, and arms at full length in front of her; over her shoulders, half thrown back, was a scarlet opera cloak, the one note of high colour in all the scheme. Behind her, on the wall, he had introduced, by one of those daring feats that were labelled by detractors as "cheeky," but by any who estimated fairly the excellence of the execution, a round gilt-framed mirror, with a convex glass in it, on which was distortedly reflected the room itself and the back of the girl's figure. It was at this that he had returned to work now.

Evelyn's studio, like all rooms much used by anyone who has at all a vivid personality, had caught much of the character of its owner. He had made it out of the top floor in his house in the King's Road, by throwing all the attics into one big room. Often for a whole day he would not stir from it till it was too dark to paint, having a tray of lunch brought him which sometimes he would savagely devour, at other times leave untouched till he was literally faint with hunger. It was easy to see, too, how the room had grown, so to speak, how it had picked up his characteristics. The big divan, for instance, in the window, piled with brightly-coloured cushions, had evidently been of the early furniture, a remnant of imperishable childhood; so, too, no doubt, was the open Dutch-tiled fireplace, the Chippendale table, the few big chairs that stood about, and the Japanese screen by the door. After that, however, all sorts of various tastes showed themselves. A heap of dry modelling clay in one corner recorded a fit of

despair, when he had asserted that the only real form of art was form itself, not colour; a violin with two strings missing denoted that after hearing Sarasate he was convinced, for several hours at least, that the music of strings was alone the flower worth plucking, and showed also a delightful conviction that it was never too late to learn, though the broken strings might imply that it was now too late to mend. A set of *Punch*, complete from the beginning, lay like a heap of morraine stones round the sofa, a bag of rusty golf-clubs stood in a corner, and behind the Japanese screen leaned a bicycle on which dust had collected, an evidence of its being, for the time at any rate, out of date far as its owner was concerned. But three months before or three months afterwards a visitor might scarcely have recognised the room again. A portrait might have been finished, and with disengaged eyes Evelyn would survey what he would certainly call his pigsty. The bicycle would be sent to the cellar with the golf clubs slung on to it, the heap of modelling clay be dumped on the dustheap, the Japanese screen banished to the kitchen, because for the moment Japanese art was a parody and a profanation, and the violin, perhaps, have its strings mended. Or again, instead of the Japanese screen being banished, Japan might have flooded the whole studio as its armies flood Manchuria, and an equally certain and uncompromising gospel pronounce that it alone was good.

It was then to this temple of contradictions that Evelyn returned, three steps to a stride, after seeing Madge off. The

figure was right; he felt sure of that, but the tone of the background somehow was not yet quite attuned to it. Above all, the mirror must be bright burnished gold, not dull, for the flame of the cloak, if it was the only note of high colour in the picture, consumed itself, burned away ineffectually, and it was with a heart that beat fast, not only from his gallop upstairs, but from excitement in this creation that was his, that he again stood before the picture. Yes, that was it; another high light was necessary.

For a moment he looked at the laughing face on his canvas, almost laughing himself. Then all on a sudden his laughter died, the need of his picture for another high light died too, for though his eyes were looking on his own presentment of Madge, it was Madge herself that his soul saw. And even as his eyes loved the work of his hands, so he knew in a burning flash of self-revelation that his soul loved her. Up till now, up till this very moment, he had not known that this was so; that it was possible he had long since recognised, that the possibility was reaching its tentacles out into regions of the probable he had recognised, so to speak, out of the corner of his eye, had recognised, but cut it, and now came the knowledge.

Evelyn gave a great sigh, raising his hands, one with the palette on the thumb, the other with the brush it held, to full stretch, and let them fall again, and stood still in front of his own inimitable portrait, drinking in no longer with the artist's eye only, but with the eye of the lover, the incomparable beauty of his beloved. That rush of sudden knowledge, so impetuous, so overwhelming,

for the moment drowned all else; it did not enter his head to consider "What next?" The present moment was so blindingly bright that everything that lay outside it was in impenetrable shadow. The intimate relations into which he was thrown with the girl, by reason of this portrait; the fact that she was engaged, and that to his best friend, did not at first have any existence in his mind; he but looked at this one fact, that he loved her to the exclusion of all else. Then, as must always happen, came reaction from the ecstatic moment, and in the train of reaction, like some grey ghost, thought. But even thought for the time was gilded by the light of that central sun, and it was long before he could frame the situation in the bounding lines of life and conduct. For love is a force which is impatient of opposition, and against opposition it will hurl itself, like a wild bird against the wires of its cage, careless of whether it is dashed to pieces, knowing only the overwhelming instinct and need of liberty, to gain which death is but the snap of a careless finger.

Then, almost with a laugh at himself, came that most important factor that he had overlooked. For a couple of minutes his egoism had run away with him, taking the bit in its teeth, and the thought that he loved her, that he needed her, had not only been uppermost, but alone in his mind. But what of her? She was engaged to Philip, and shortly to be married to him, and he himself was merely to be relegated to that somewhat populous class of "odd man out." That ebb from the full flood of his passion was swift; it came in a moment, as swiftly as the

other had come. So that was all that was left of him, all that was possible; that he should just stand aside while the other two went on their way, not daring even to touch the hem of her garment, for she would most surely draw it away from him. That clearly was the logical outcome, but logical as it was, not a single fibre of his inmost self accepted it. That, the one thing which to the reasonable mind must assuredly happen was to him the one thing which could not possibly happen. The very strength of his newly-awakened love was the insuperable bar to it; it could not be, for what – and the question seemed to himself at that moment perfectly unanswerable – what on earth was to happen to him in that case? Here was the Pagan, the interesting survival, as Tom Merivale had called him, most unmistakably surviving, shouting, as it were, that its own happiness, its own need, was the one thing which the rest of the world must accept and respect. And, since the only way in which due acceptation could be secured for it was conditional on Madge's loving him, that had to happen also. Yes, nothing else would do; she had to love him.

This reasoning, if one can call by so deliberate a word these leaping conclusions, was not any act of reflecting egoism. His emotions, his whole being, had been suddenly stirred, and there necessarily rose to the surface the sediment, so to speak, of that which dwelt in its depths. The whole course and habit of his past life no doubt was responsible for what was there, but he was no more responsible at this particular moment for the thoughts and conclusions that leaped in fire into his mind than is a man

who is suddenly startled responsible for starting; his nerves have acted without the dictation of his brains. But with Evelyn, as the minutes passed, and he still sat there with heightened colour and flashing eyes, looking at his unfinished picture, he ceased to be comparable to a suddenly startled man; the thoughts that had sprung unbidden to his mind were not put away; they remained there, and they grew in brightness. His conscious reflections endorsed the first instinctive impulse.

It so happened that he had arranged to go down that afternoon to spend a couple of nights in the New Forest with the Hermit, but when this engagement was again remembered by him, it seemed to him at first impossible to go. What he had learned in this last hour was a thing so staggering that he felt as if all the affairs of life, social intercourse, the discussion of this subject or of that, as if any subject but one contained even the germ or protoplasm of importance, had become impossible. But go or stay, everything was impossible except to win Madge's love. Then another impossibility, bigger perhaps than any, made its appearance, for the most impossible thing of all was to be alone, anything was more endurable than that; and side by side with that rose another, namely, the impossibility of keeping his knowledge to himself. He must, he felt, tell somebody, and of all people in the world the Hermit was the person whom it would be most easy to tell.

Then a sort of pale image of Philip came into his mind. He was conscious of no disloyalty to him, because he was incapable

of thinking of him at all, except as of somebody, a vague somebody, who dwelt among the shadows outside the light. Mrs. Home was no more, nobody was anything more than a dweller in these shadows. Nor, indeed, had he been able to think of Philip directly, concentratedly, would he have accused himself of disloyalty; either Madge would never love himself, in which case no harm was done to anyone, or she would do so, in which case her marriage with Philip was an impossibility – an impossibility, too, the existence of which had better be found out before it was legally confirmed. Yet all this but quivered through his mind and was gone again, he caught but as passing a glimpse of the world of life and conduct as he caught of the stations that his train thundered through in its westerly course; they but brushed by his inward eye, and had passed before they had ever been focussed or seen with anything like clearness.

The Hermit had once told him, it may be remembered, that he wanted deepening, and Evelyn on that occasion had enunciated the general principle that he had no use for deeps, the surface being sufficient for his needs. And even now, though his egotism was so all-embracing, it was in no sense whatever profound. He did not probe himself, it was of the glittering surface alone on which shone this sun of love that he was conscious. Deeps, perhaps, might lie beneath, but they were unexplored; life like a pleasure boat with shallow-dipping oars went gaily across him. Indeed it was probable that before the depth – if depths were there – could be sounded the sun, so to speak, would have to go

in, for with that dazzle on the water it was impossible to see what lay below.

Tom Merivale's cottage, which had begun life as two cottages, stood very solitary some mile or two outside Brockenhurst, and though the high road passed within a few hundred yards of it, it was impossible to conceive a place that more partook of the essential nature of a hermitage. Between it and the high road lay a field, with only a rough track across it; beyond that, and nearer to the house, an orchard, while a huge box-hedge, compact and homogeneous with the growth and careful clipping of many years, was to any who wished to be shut off from the outer world a bar as impenetrable as a ring of fire. Immediately beyond this stood the cottage itself, looking away from the road; in front a strip of garden led down to the little river Fawn, and across the river lay a great open expanse of heath, through which, like a wedge, came down a big triangular wood of beech-trees. It was this way, over the garden and the open forest, that the cottage looked; not a house of any kind was in sight, and one might watch, like a ship-wrecked mariner for a sail, for any sign of human life, and yet in a long summer day perhaps the watcher would see nothing to tell him that he was not alone as far as humankind went in this woodland world. Tom had built out a long deep verandah that ran the whole length of the cottage on the garden front; brick pillars at the two corners supported a wooden roof, and a couple of steps led down into the garden. Down the centre of that ran a pergola, over which climbed in tangled luxuriance the long-

limbed tribes of climbing roses. Ramblers spilt their crimson clusters over it, or lay in streaks and balls of white and yellow foam, while carmine pillar seemed to struggle in their embrace, and honeysuckle cast loving tendrils round them both and kissed them promiscuously. And though a gardener might have deplored this untended riot of vegetation, yet even the most orderly of his fraternity could not have failed to admire. Nature and this fruitful soil and the warm, soft air to which frost was a stranger, had taken matters into their own hands, and the result, though as fortuitous apparently as the splashed glories of a sunset, had yet a sunset's lavishness and generosity of colour. On each side of this pergola lay a small lawn of well-tended turf, and a shrubbery on one side of lilacs and syringa and on the other a tall brick wall with a deep garden bed below it gave a fragrant frame to the whole. The Hermit's avowal, indeed, that for the last year he had done nothing except carpentering and gardening implied a good deal of the latter, for the turf, as has been stated, was beautifully rolled and cut, and the beds showed evidence of seed-time and weeding, and had that indefinable but unmistakable air of being zealously cared for. But since such operations were concerned with plants, no principle was broken.

Evelyn arrived here soon after six, and found himself in undisturbed possession. Mr. Merivale, so said his servant, had gone off soon after breakfast that morning and had not yet returned. His guest, however, had been expected, and he himself would be sure to be in before long. Indeed in a few minutes his

cry of welcome to Evelyn sounded from the lower end of the garden, and he left his long chair in the verandah and went down through the pergola to meet him.

"Ah, my dear fellow," said Tom, "it is delightful to see you. You have come from London, have you not, where there are so many people and so few things. I have been thinking about London, and you have no idea how remote it seems. And how is the picture getting on – Miss Ellington's, I mean?"

Evelyn looked at him with his direct, luminous gaze. Though he had come down here with the object of telling his friend what had happened, he found that at this first moment of meeting him, he was incapable of making his tongue go on its errand.

"Ah, the portrait," he said; "it really is getting on well. Up to this morning, at any rate, I have put there what I have meant to put there, and, which is rarer with me, I have not put there anything which I did not mean. Do you see how vastly more important that is?"

The Hermit had passed his day in the open merely in shirt and trousers, but his coat was lying in a hammock slung between two pillars of the pergola, and he put it on.

"Why, of course," he said, "a thing which ought not to be there poisons the rest; anything put in which should be left out sets the whole thing jarring. That's exactly why I left the world you live in. There was so much that shouldn't have been there, from my point of view at least."

Evelyn laughed.

"But if we all left out all that each of us thinks shouldn't be there, there would be precious little left in the world," he said. "For instance, I should leave out Lady Ellington without the slightest question."

He paused a moment.

"And when the portrait is finished she, no doubt, would leave out me," he added, with charming candour.

"Quite so," said Merivale; "and since I, not being an uncontrolled despot, could not 'leave out' people, which I suppose is a soft way of saying terminate their existence, I went away instead to a place where they were naturally left out, where for me their existence was terminated. It is all part of the simplifying process."

They had established themselves in the verandah again, where a silent-footed man was laying the table for dinner; and it struck Evelyn for the moment as an inconsistency that the tablecloth should be so fine and the silver so resplendent.

"But in your simplification," said Evelyn, indicating the table, "you don't leave out that sort of thing."

"No, because if I once opened the question of whether I should live on the bare necessities of life, or allow myself, so to speak, a little dripping on my bread, the rest of my life would be spent in settling infinitesimal points which I really don't think much matter. I could no doubt sell my silver and realize a few hundred pounds, and give that away. But I don't think it matters much."

"All the same, it is inconsistent."

"In details that does not seem to me to matter either," said Merivale. "For instance, I don't eat meat partly because I think that it is better not to take life if you can avoid it. But when a midge settles on my hand and bites me, if possible I kill it."

"Well, anyhow your inconsistencies make up a very charming whole," said the other, looking round. "It is all charming."

"I'm glad, and you think you can pass a day or two here without missing the – the complications you live among? I wish Philip could have come down, too; but he is buried in work, it appears, and we know how his leisure is occupied just now."

Evelyn moved suddenly in his chair.

"Ah, do you know, I am rather glad Philip isn't here," he said. "I don't think – " and he broke off again. "And as soon as I've finished this portrait, I'm going to do his," he added.

He was silent a moment, feeling somehow that he never would do Philip's portrait. He would not be able to see him, he would not be able to paint him; something, no shadow, but something so bright would stand between him and the canvas that he would be unable to see beyond or through it.

But Merivale did not seem to notice the check. His eyes were looking out over the glowing garden, where all colours were turned to flame in the almost level rays of the sun as it drew near to its setting. The wall behind the deep garden bed glowed as if the bricks themselves were luminous, light seemed to exude from the grass, the flowers were bells and cups of fire.

"Ah, this is the best moment of all the day," he said, "when

sunset comes like this. The whole of the sunshine of the hours seem distilled into it, it is the very essence of light."

He rose from his chair, and went to the edge of the verandah, stretching his arms wide and breathing deeply of the warm, fragrant air. Then he turned again to his companion.

"That, too, I hope is what death will be like," he said. "All the sunlight of life will be concentrated into that moment, until one's mere body can hold no more of the glow that impregnates it, and is shattered. Look at those clusters of rambler; a little more and they must burst with the colour."

Evelyn got up too.

"Don't be so uncomfortable, Tom," he cried, in a sort of boyish petulance. "I could go mad when I think of death. It is horrible, frightening. I don't want to die, and I don't want to get old. I want to be young always, to feel as I feel to-day, and never a jot less keenly. That's what you must tell me while I am here; how am I to remain young? You seem to have solved it; you are much younger than when I knew you first."

Tom laughed.

"And another proof of my youth is that I feel as I do about death," he said. "The more you are conscious of your own life, the more absurd the notion that one can die becomes. Why, even one's body won't die; it will make life, it will be grass on one's grave, just as the dead leaves that fall from the tree make the leaf-mould which feeds that tree or another tree or the grass. It doesn't in the least matter which, it is all one, it is all life."

Evelyn shivered slightly.

"Yes, quite true, and not the least consoling," he said; "for what is the use of being alive if one loses one's individuality? It doesn't make death the least less terrible to me, even if I know that I am going to become a piece of groundsel and be pecked at by your canary. I don't want to be groundsel, I don't want to be pecked at, and I don't want to become your canary. Great heavens, fancy being a bit of a canary!"

"Ah, but only your body," said the other.

Evelyn got up.

"Yes, and what happens to the rest? You tell me that a piece of me, for my body is a piece of me, becomes a canary, and you don't know about the rest. Indeed it is not a cheerful prospect. If some – some bird pecks my eyes out, is it a consolation to me, who becomes blind, to learn that a bird has had dinner?"

Merivale looked at him; even as Gladys had seen that some change had come in Madge, so he saw that something had happened to Evelyn, and he registered that impression in his mind. But the change, whatever it was, was not permanent – it was a phase, a mood only, for next moment Evelyn had broken out into a perfectly natural laugh.

"You shan't make me think of melancholy subjects any more," he cried. "Indeed you may try, but you won't be able to do it. I have never been more full of the joy of life than to-day. That was why I was so glad to come down here, as you are a sort of apostle of joy. But it's true that I also want to talk to you some

time about something quite serious. Not now though, but after dinner. Also you will have to show me all the bag of conjuring tricks, the mechanical nightingale, the disappearing omelette – I could do that, by the way – and the Pan pipes. Now, I'm going upstairs to change; I've got London things on, and my artistic eye is offended. Where shall I find you?"

"I shall go down to bathe. Won't you come?" said Merivale.

Evelyn wrinkled up his nose.

"No, I've not been hot enough. Besides, one is inferior to the frog in the water, which is humiliating. Any frog swims so much better!"

SIXTH

IERIVALE had scooped out a long bathing-pool at the bottom of the garden, and when Evelyn left him, he took his towel and walked down to it. A little higher up was a weir, and from this he plunged into a soda water of vivifying bubble, and floated down as the woven ropes of water willed to take him till he grounded on the beds of yellow, shining gravel at the tail of the pool, laughing with joy at the cool touch of the stream. The day had been very hot, and since breakfast he had been on the move, now under the shadow of the trees, but as often as not grilled by the great blaze of the sun on the open heaths, and it was with an extraordinary sense of renewed life and of kinship with this beautiful creature that was poured from the weir in never-ending volumes that he gave himself up to the clean, sensuous thrill of the moment. It seemed to him that the strong flood that bore him, with waves and eddies just tipped with the gold and crimson of the sun, entirely interpenetrated and possessed him. He was not more himself than was the stream, the stream was not more itself than it was he. The blue vault overhead with its fleeces of cloud beginning to flush rosily was part of the same thing, the beech-trees with leaves a-quiver in the evening breeze were but a hand or an eyebrow of himself.

Then, with the briskness of his renewed vigour, he set himself to swim against this piece of himself, as if right hand should

wrestle with left, breasting the river with vigorous strokes, yet scarcely moving against the press of the running stream, while like a frill the water stood up bubbling round his neck. Then again, with limbs deliciously tired with the struggle, he turned on his back and floated down again, with arms widespread, to increase the surface of contact. Though this sense of unity with the life of Nature was never absent from him, so that it was his last waking thought at night and stood by him while he slept, ready to awake him again, water somehow, live, running water with the sun on its surface, or the rain beating on to it, with its lucent depths and waving water-weeds that the current combed, gave it him more than anything else. Nothing else had quite that certainty of everlasting life about it; it was continually outpoured, yet not diminished; it mingled with the sea, and sprang to heaven in all the forms and iridescent colours of mist and cloud, to return again to the earth in the rain that made the grass to grow and fed the springs. And this envelopment of himself in it was a sort of outward symbol of his own absorption in Nature, the outward and visible sign of it. Every day the mystery and the wonder of it all increased; all cleansing, all renewal was contained here, for even as the water cleansed and renewed him, so through the countless ages it cleansed and renewed itself. And here alone the intermediary step, death, out of which came new life, was omitted. To water there was no death; it was eternally young, and the ages brought no abatement of its vigour.

Then in the bright twilight of the sun just set he dressed and

walked back to the house to find that he had been nearly an hour gone, and that it was close on dinner-time.

During the earlier part, anyhow, of that meal Evelyn showed no return of his disquietude, but, as was his wont, poured out floods of surprising stuff. He talked shop quite unashamed, and this evening the drawbacks of an artist's life supplied his text.

"Yes, everyone is for ever insisting," he said, "that the artist's life is its own reward, because his work is creative; but there are times when I would sooner be the man who puts bristles in toothbrushes. Those folk don't allow for the days when you sit in front of a blank canvas, or a canvas half-finished, and look at it in an absolute stupor of helplessness. I suppose they would say 'Go on, put down what you see,' and they are so wooden-headed as not to realise that on such occasions, unfortunately numerous, one doesn't see anything, and one couldn't put it down if one did. There is a blank wall in front of one. And it is then I say with Mr. Micawber, 'No one is without a friend who is possessed of shaving materials' – yet I don't kill myself. Oh, hang it, here we are talking about death again! Give me some more fish."

Merivale performed this hospitable duty.

"Ah, but what do you expect?" he asked. "Surely you can't think it's possible that a man can live all the time in the full blaze of imaginative vision? You might as well expect him to run at full speed from the day he was born to the day of his – well, all the time, as you dislike the word."

Evelyn drummed the table with his fingers.

"But it's just that I want," he cried. "Whose fault is it that I can't do what I feel is inside me all the time? If I have what you call the imaginative vision at all, who has got any business to put a cap like the cap of a camera lens over it, so that I can see nothing whatever? Oh, the pity of it! Sitters, too! Sitters can be so antipathetic that I feel when I look at them that the imaginative vision is oozing out of me, like sawdust when you clip a doll's leg, and that in another moment I shall be just a heap of collapsed rags on the floor, with a silly waxen head and shoulders on the top. If only people would come to me to paint their caricatures I could do some rippers. The next woman I've got to paint when these two are finished is a pink young thing of sixty, with a face that has exactly the expression of a pansy. Lord! Lord!"

This was so completely the normal Evelyn Dundas that Merivale, if not reassured, for there was no need for that, at any rate thought that he had been mistaken in his idea that some change had come to him. He was just the same vivid, eager boy that he had always been, blessed with one supreme talent, which, vampire-like, seemed to suck the blood out of all the other possibilities and dormant energies of his nature, and suck, too, all sense of responsibility from him.

"Refuse them then," he said; "say 'I won't paint you; you sap my faculties.'"

Evelyn burst out into a great shout of laughter.

"'Mr. Dundas presents his compliments to Lady What's-hername,'" he said, "'and regrets, on inspection, that he is

unable to paint her portrait, owing to the fact that a prolonged contemplation of her charms would sap his artistic powers, which he feels himself unwilling to part with.' What would be this rising young painter's position in a year's time, eh? His studio would be as empty as the New Forest. You might then come and live there, Tom."

Evelyn finished his wine and lit a cigarette all in one breath.

"Now, strange though it may seem to you," he said, "I feel that I've talked enough about myself for the moment, though I propose to go on afterwards. So, by way of transition, we will talk about you. As I dressed a number of frightful posers came into my head about you, and I want categorical answers. Now you've been here how long? More than a year, isn't it? What can you show for it? Number two: What's it all about? Number three: How can you call yourself a student of Nature when you deliberately shut your eyes to all the suffering, all the death, all the sacrifice that goes on eternally in Nature? I might as well call myself an artist and refuse to use blue and red in my pictures. I remember asking you something of this sort before, and your answer was eminently unsatisfactory. Besides, I have forgotten it."

Merivale moved sideways to the table, and crossed one leg over the other.

"Does it really at all interest you?" he said.

"It does, or I should not ask. Another thing, too: I have been looking at you all dinner, and I could swear you look much

younger than you did five years ago. Indeed, if I saw you now for the first time I should say you were not much more than twenty. Also you used to be a touchy, irritable sort of devil, and you look now as if nothing in the world had the power to make you cease smiling. Did you know, by the way, that you are always smiling a little?"

Tom laughed.

"No, not consciously," he said; "but now you mention it, it seems impossible that I should not."

"Well, begin," said Evelyn, with his usual impatience. "Tell me all about it, and attempt to answer all those very pertinent questions. Smoke, too; I listen better to a person who is smoking, because I feel that he is more comfortable."

A sudden wind stirred in the garden, blowing towards them in the verandah the sleeping fragrance of the beds and the wandering noises of the night, which, all together make up what we call the silence of the night, even as the mixture of primary colours makes white.

"Smoke? No, I don't smoke now," said Merivale; "but if you really want to know, I will tell you all I can tell you. The conjuring tricks, as you call them, I suppose you will take for granted?"

Evelyn, comfortable with his coffee and liqueur, assented.

"Yes, leave them out," he said. "Here beginneth the gospel."

He tried in these words to be slightly offensive; the offensiveness, however, went wide of the mark, and he was sorry. For the Hermit, as he had known him in the world, was

singularly liable to take offence, to be irritable, impatient, to be stamping and speechifying on an extremely human platform. But no vibration of any such impatience was in Merivale's voice, and in his words there was no backhander to answer it. So the gospel began.

"It is all so simple," he said, "yet I suppose that to complicated people simplicity is as difficult to understand as is complexity to simple people. But here it is, anyhow, and make the best or the worst of it; that is entirely your concern."

"There is God," he said, "there is also Nature, which I take to be the visible, tangible, audible expression of Him. There is also man – of which you and I are specimens, and whether we are above or below the average doesn't matter in the least – and man by a dreadful process called civilisation has worked himself back into a correspondingly dreadful condition. If he were either fish, flesh, or fowl one would know where to put him, but he is none of those. He seems, at any rate to me, to be a peculiar product of his own making, and instead of being a creature compounded of life and joy, which should be his ingredients and also his study, he has become a creature who is mated with sorrow and at the end with death. He has become rotten without ever being ripe, the flower to which he should have attained has been cankered in the bud. Now, all this it has been my deliberate aim to leave behind me and to forget, and to go straight back to that huge expression of the joy of God, which man has been unable to spoil or render sorrowful, to the great hymn of Nature. Listen to that

for a moment – and for the more moments you listen to it the more unmistakable will its tenour be – and you will hear that the whole impression is one of life and of joy. There is, it is true, throughout Nature the sound of death, of cruelty, and of one creature preying on another; but the net result is not death, it is ever-increasing life. And so when I went to Nature I shut my ears and eyes to that minor undercurrent of sound. Of the result I was sure; day after day there is more life in the world, in spite of the death that day after day goes on. All the death goes to form fresh life. In the same way with the joy and sorrow of Nature; for every animal that suffers there are two that are glad, for every tree that dies there are two in the full vigour of the joy of life. And that joy and that life is my constant study. I soak myself in it, and shall so do until I am utterly impregnated with it. And when that day comes, when there is no tiny or obscure fibre in my being that does not completely realise it, then, with a flash of revelation, so I take it, I shall 'grasp the scheme of things entire.' Whether by life or by death, I shall truly realise that I and that moth flitting by, and the odours of the garden and the river are indivisibly one, just an expression of the spirit of life, which is God."

He paused a moment.

"There were two other questions you asked me," he said. "What have I got to show for the years I have spent here? I shrug my shoulders at that; it is I who am being shown. The second concerns my personal appearance, for you say I look younger. That is probably quite true and quite inevitable, for the

contemplation of the eternal youth of the world I suppose must make one younger, body and soul alike. And that is all, I think."

Evelyn was listening with extreme attention; he did not look in the least uninterested.

"My word, you've got a perfectly sober plan at the bottom of it all," he said, "and I thought half of it was moonshine and the other half imagination. There is one more question – two more. What if the whole of the suffering and the cruelty and the death in Nature is made clear to you in a flash, if it is that which will come to make you grasp the scheme of things entire?"

Merivale smiled still, rocking forward in his chair with his hands clasped round his knee.

"That is possible," he said, "and I recognise that. But I don't think I am frightened at it If it is to be so, it is to be so. Though I suppose one won't live after it. Well?"

"And the second question. You think, then, it is our duty to seek happiness and joy and forget the sorrow of the world?"

"I think it is so for me," said he, "though I do think that there are many people, most, I suppose, that realise themselves through sorrow and suffering. I can only say that I believe I am not one of those. The way does not lie for me there."

Evelyn got up, and stood leaning on the balustrade of the verandah. This was beginning to touch him more closely now; his own threads were beginning to interweave in the scheme Merivale drew.

"And for me," he said. "What is your diagnosis of me? Am I

one of those who will find themselves through sorrow or through joy?"

Merivale turned to him with almost the same eagerness in his face as Evelyn himself showed.

"Ah, how can I tell you that?" he said, "beyond telling you at least that in my opinion, which after all is only my opinion, it is in joy that you, almost above everyone I know, will ripen and bear fruit. Sorrow, asceticism is the road by which some approach happiness, but I do not see you on that road. Renunciation for you – "

Evelyn got up and came a step closer.

"Yes? Yes?" he cried.

Merivale answered him by another question.

"Something has happened to you," he said. "What is it?"

"I have fallen in love," said the other. "I only knew it to-day. Yes, her, Madge Ellington. Good God, man, I love her! And I am painting her – I see her nearly daily alone; it is my business to study her face and get to know her – "

His voice dropped suddenly.

"What am I to do?" he said after a moment. "Philip, the whole thing – "

"Ah, you can't go on," said Merivale quickly. "You must see that. Wherever our paths lie, there is honour – "

"Honour?" cried Evelyn almost savagely. "Have I not as good a right to love her as Philip has? You can't tie one down like that! Besides, how can I help loving her? Night and day are not less in

my control. Besides, I have no reason to suppose that she loves me, so what harm is done? But if she does or should – "

Again he stopped, for there was no need to go on; the conclusion of the sentence was not less clear because it was unspoken. After a moment he continued.

"And what was your view just now about renunciation for me?" he asked.

Merivale got up.

"I don't know what to say to you," he said. "What do you propose, you yourself?"

"I propose to tell her what I know – that I love her," said he.

There was a long pause; Merivale was looking out over the dusky garden, and his lips moved as if he was trying to frame some sentence, yet no words came. In the East the moon was soon to rise behind the wedge of beech-wood which came diagonally across the heath, and though it was not yet visible, the sky was changing from the dark velvet blue which had succeeded sunset to the mysterious dove colour which heralds the moon. A night breeze stirred among the shrubs, and the scent of the stocks was wafted into the verandah, twined, as it were, with the swooning fragrance of the syringa. But for once Merivale was unconscious of the witchery of the hour; in spite of himself, the interests, the problems, the suffering and renunciation of human life, from which he had thought he had weaned himself, claimed him again. He had tried, and in great measure succeeded, in detaching himself from them, but he had not completely broken

away from them yet. He had enlisted under the banner of joy, but now from the opposing hosts there came a cry to him, and he could not shut his ears to it. Here was the necessity for suffering, it could not but be that of these two friends of his, suffering poignant and cruel lay before one of them, though which that one should be he did not know. But the necessity was dragged before his notice.

Then from the garden his eyes rested on Evelyn again, as he stood close to him with his keen, beautiful face, his eyes in which burned the wonder of his love, his long, slim limbs and hands that trembled, all so astonishingly alive, and all so instinct with the raptures and the rewards of living, and he could not say "Your duty lies here," even had he been certain that it was so, so grey and toneless, so utterly at variance with the whole gospel of his own life would the advice have been. Yet neither, for his detachment from human affairs was not, nor could it be, complete, could he say to him "Yes, all the joy you can lay hands on is yours," for on the other side stood Philip. But his sympathies were not there.

He spread out his hands with a sort of hopeless gesture.

"I don't know what to say: I don't even know what I think," he said. "It is one of those things that is without solution, or rather there are two solutions, both of which are inevitably right, and utterly opposed. But you have as yet no reason to think that she loves you; all goes to show otherwise."

"Yes, all," said Evelyn softly, "but somehow I don't believe it.

I can't help that either."

Then suddenly he took hold of Merivale's shoulders with both hands.

"Ah, you don't understand," he said. "You were saying just now that you and the river were indivisibly one. That is a mere figure of speech, though I understand what you mean by it. But with me it is sober truth; I am Madge. I have no existence apart from her. Some door has been opened, I have passed through it into her. Half oneself! Someone says man alone is only half himself. What nonsense! Till he loves he is complete in himself, but then he ceases to be himself at all."

Wild as were his words, so utterly was he in the grip of his newly-awakened passion that possessed him, there was something convincing to Merivale about it. He might as well have tied a piece of string across a line to stop a runaway locomotive as hope to influence Evelyn by words or advice, especially since he at heart pulled in the opposite way to the advice he might thus give. The matter was beyond control; it must work itself out to its inevitable end.

"And when will you tell her?" he asked.

"I don't know. The moment I see she loves me, if that moment comes."

"And if it does not?"

Again his passion shook him like some great wave combing the weeds of the sea.

"It must," he said.

That clearly was the last word on the subject, and even as he spoke the rim of the moon a week from full topped the beech-wood, and flooded the garden with silver, and both watched in silence till the three-quarter circle swung clear of the trees. Just a month ago Evelyn had watched it rising with Madge on the terrace of Philip's house, and the sight of it now made the last month pass in review before him like some scene that moved behind the actors, as in the first act in *Parsifal*. The light it shed to-day seemed to flash back and illumine the whole of those weeks, and showed him how in darkness that plant had grown which to-day had flowered rose-coloured and perfect. Every day since then, when the seed had first been planted in his soul, had it shot up towards the light; there had been no day, so he felt now, on which the growth had stood still; it had been uninterrupted from the first germination to this its full flower. But the last word had been spoken, and when the moon had cleared the tree-tops, Merivale turned to him.

"I seldom sleep in the house," he said, "and I certainly shall not to-night."

"Where then?" asked the other.

"Oh, anywhere, often in several places. In fact, I seldom wake in the morning where I go to bed in the evening."

"Sleep-walking?" suggested Evelyn.

"Oh, dear no! But you know all animals wake in the night and turn over, or get up for a few moments and take a mouthful of grass. Well, the same thing happens to me. I always wake

about three in the morning, and walk about a little, and, as I say, usually go to sleep again somewhere else. But I suppose the dignity of man asserts itself, and I often go further than animals. For instance, I shall probably go to sleep in the hammock in the garden, and walk up into the beech-wood when I wake for the first time."

"Ah, that does sound rather nice," said Evelyn appreciatively.

"Well, come and sleep out too. It will do you all the good in the world. You can have the hammock; I'll lie on the grass. I always have a rug."

But Evelyn's appreciation was not of the practical sort.

"Heaven forbid!" he said. "My bedroom is good enough for me."

It was already late, and he took a candle and went upstairs, Merivale following him to see he had all he wanted. His servant, however, had arranged the utmost requirements in the most convenient way, and the sight suddenly suggested a new criticism to Evelyn.

"Keeping a servant, too," he said. "Is not that frightfully inconsistent?"

Merivale laughed.

"You don't suppose I keep a servant when I am alone?" he asked. "But I find I am so bad at looking after the requirements of my guests that I hire one if anyone happens to be here. He is a man from the hotel at Brockenhurst."

"I apologise," said the other. "But do dismiss him to-morrow.

For I didn't want to come to an hotel; I wanted to see how the Hermit really lived."

"Stop over to-morrow then, and you will see," said Merivale. "But I keep a woman in the house, who cooks."

"That also is inconsistent."

"No, I don't think so. It takes longer than you would imagine to do all the housework yourself. I tried it last winter and found it not worth while. Besides, dusting and cleaning are so absorbing. I could think of nothing else."

"But doesn't she find it absorbing?"

Merivale laughed.

"I feel sure she doesn't," he said, "or she would do it better. But when I dusted for myself, nothing short of perfection would content me. I was dusting all day long."

Evelyn looked doubtfully at his bed.

"Shall I have to make it – whatever 'making' means?" he asked, "if I sleep in it? If so, I really don't think it would be worth while. Besides, I know I shan't sleep, and if I don't sleep I am a wreck."

Merivale raised his eyebrows.

"Surely you sleep when you want sleep just as you eat when you are hungry," he said, "or is that an exploded superstition?"

"Quite exploded. I shan't sleep a wink," said Evelyn, beginning to undress. "Oh, how can I?" he cried.

"And you really want to?"

"Why, of course. I'm as cross as two sticks if I don't."

Merivale shook his head.

"I'll make you sleep if you wish," he said. "Get into bed. I must go and turn out the lights. I'll be back in two minutes."

He left the room, and Evelyn undressed quickly.

All that had happened to-day ran like a mill-race in his head, and, arguing from previous experience, he knew perhaps the tithe of what awaited him when the light was out. For often before, when a picture, not as now the original of it, occupied him, misshapen parodies of rest had been his till cock-crow. First of all would come a sense of satisfaction at being alone, at being able to let his thoughts take their natural course uninterrupted; he would feast his eyes on the untenanted blackness, letting his imagination paint there all that it had been so intensely occupied with during the day. But then as the brain wearied, in place of the ideal he had been striving for would come distorted reflections of it, seen as if in some bloated mirror, and still awake he would see his thoughts translated into some horrible grotesque that would startle him into sitting-up in bed, just for the grasping of the bed-post, or the feeling of the wall, to bring himself back into the realm of concrete things. Otherwise the grotesques would grow into dancing, shapeless horrors, and in a moment he would have to wrench himself free from the clutches of nightmare and start up, with dripping brow and quivering throat that could not scream, into reality again. But to-night he feared no nightmare; he knew simply that sleep could not come to him, his excitement had invaded and conquered the drowsy

lands, and though he felt now that he would be content to think and think and love till morning, morning, he knew, would, like an obsequious waiter, present the bill for the sleepless night. Consequently, when Merivale again entered, he welcomed him.

"I demand a conjuring-trick," he said, "I know I shan't sleep at all, unless you have some charm for me. Good God, how can I sleep? And, after all, why should I want to? Isn't waking good enough?"

Merivale paused; waking and sleeping seemed to him no more matters for concern than they seem to an animal which sleeps when it is sleepy, and wakes when its sleepiness has gone.

"That is entirely for you to settle," he said. "If you want to sleep I can make you; if you don't, I shall go to sleep myself. I shall do that in any case," he added.

Evelyn was already overwrought with the events of the day, and he spoke petulantly.

"Oh, make me sleep, then!" he said. "There is to-morrow coming. I can do nothing to-night, so let's get it over."

"Lie down, then," said the Hermit, "and look at me, look at my eyes, I mean."

He sat down on the edge of Evelyn's bed, and spoke low and slow.

"The wind is asleep," he said, "it sleeps among the trees of the forest, for the time of sleep has come, and everything sleeps, your love sleeps too. Lie still;" he said, as Evelyn moved, "the trees of the forest sleep; and their leaves sleep, and high in the branches

the birds sleep. Everything sleeps, the tired even and the weary sleep, and those who are strong sleep, and those who are weak."

Evelyn's eyelids quivered, shut a moment, then half-opened again.

"The flowers sleep," said Merivale, "and the eyelids of their petals are closed, as your eyelids are closing. Sleep, the black soft wing, has shut over them, as the wings of birds shut over their heads. The earth sleeps, the very stones of her sleep; she will not stir till morning, or if she stirs it will be but to sleep again. The sad and the happy sleep, the very sea sleeps and is hushed, and the tides of the sea are asleep. Sleep, too," he said, slightly raising his voice, "sleep till they wake – sleep till I wake you."

He waited a moment, but Evelyn's eyelids did not even quiver again. Then he blew out the light and left the room.

Merivale stepped softly down the stairs, and went out on to the verandah, where they had dined a few hours before. At the touch of the soft night-air all the trouble that during this evening had been his was evaporated and vanished. The sum of his consciousness was contained in the bracket, that he was alive, and that he was part of life. It was like stepping into an ocean that received him and bore him on its surface, or took him to its depths; which mattered not at all – the thing embraced and encompassed him. He went back again to it from the fretful trivialities that had arrested him as the midge on his wrist could for the moment arrest him, trivially and momentarily causing him some infinitesimal annoyance. But that was over; the huge sky

was above him, the world was asleep, and was his possession. It – the material part of it – was but a dream, the spirit of it all suffused him. There was life everywhere, life in its myriad forms, its myriad beauties. The sleepy voice of the river was part of him, the moon was he, the utmost twinkle of a star was he also. Yet no less the smallest blade of grass was he; there was no atom of the universe with which he did not claim identity.

Yes, there was one, the fretting of the human spirit, whereas his own did not fret. What he could interpret existence into was to him satisfying. For himself he longed and wished for nothing, except to hold himself open, as he indeed held himself, for the moods of Nature to play upon. Yet in that bedroom upstairs he had left one, asleep indeed by the mere exercise of a stronger will on his, who would to-morrow awake and combat and perhaps succumb to forces that were stronger than he. For himself, he combatted with no force; he but yielded in welcome to what to him was irresistible. But Evelyn, who slept now, would awake to try his strength against another. Which was right?

SEVENTH

GLADYS ELLINGTON, as has been remarked, was not in the least ill-natured, and never even hinted ill-natured things against anybody unless she was certain to be undiscovered. So, as all the world knew, since she was not "quite devoted," a phrase of her's, to her mother-in-law, the merest elements of wisdom demanded of her that she should be unreserved in her commendation of Madge's engagement. Unreserved, in consequence, she was, even to her own husband. He also was quite unreserved, but his unreserve was whiskered and red-faced like himself, and bore not the slightest resemblance to his wife's voluble raptures.

"Seems to me," he said, "that Madge has married him for his money. Don't believe she loves him. Cold-blooded fish like that. Don't tell me. Hate a girl marrying for money. American and so on. Good love match, like you and me, Gladys. I hadn't a sou, you hadn't a penny. Same sort of thing, eh?"

Lord Ellington usually ended his sentences with "Eh?" If he did not end them with "Eh?" he ended them with "What?" The effect in either case was the same, for, like Pilate, he did not wait for an answer. "Eh" or "what," in fact, meant that he had not finished; if he had finished, he ended up his period with "Don't tell me." As a consequence, perhaps, nobody told him anything. All worked together for good here, because he would not have

understood it if they had. He was fond of his wife, and slightly fonder of his dinner. Why she had married him was a mystery; but there are so many mysteries of this kind that it is best to leave them alone.

Gladys, on this occasion (a speech which had given rise to his, in so far as any speech or connected thought would account for what Lord Ellington would say next), had merely remarked that the engagement was very, very nice.

"You seem to object to him," she said, "because he is rich. That is very feeble. I never knew riches to be a bar to anything except the kingdom of heaven, with which you, Ellington, are not immediately concerned. But you are much more immediately concerned with South African mines. Now, he is dining here to-night, and so is Madge. If you can't get something out of him between the time we leave the room and you join us, I really shall despair of you."

A heavy, jocular look came into Lord Ellington's face.

"You don't despair of me yet, Gladys?" he said.

"No, not quite. Very nearly, but not quite. Oh, Ellington, do wake up for once to-night! Philip Home moves a finger in that dreadful office of his in the City, somewhere E.C., and you and I are beggars, even worse than now, or comparatively opulent. Ask him which finger he moves. If only I were you, I could do it in two minutes. So I'll allow you ten. Not more than that, because we've got the Reeves' box at the opera, and Melba is singing."

"Lot of squawking," said he. "Why not sit at home? Who

wants to hear squawking? All in Italian too. Don't understand a word, nor do you. And you don't know one note from another, nor do I. Don't tell me."

Gladys required all her tact, which is the polite word for evasion, sometimes, in getting her way with her husband, and all her diplomacy, which is the polite word for lying. If he got a notion into his head it required something like the Lisbon earthquake to get it out; if, on the other hand, a thing commoner with him, he had not a notion in his head, it required a flash of lightning, followed by the steady application of a steam-hammer to get it in. Also in talking to him it was almost as difficult to concentrate one's own attention as it was to command his, for the fact that he was being talked to produced in him, unless he was dining, an irresistible tendency to make a quarter-deck of the room he was in, up and down which he shuffled. When this became intolerable, Gladys told him not to quarter-deck, but this she only did as a last resort, because he attended rather more when he was quarter-decking than when not.

"Never mind about the opera then," she said, "you needn't go unless you like. But what is important is that since Madge is going to marry Philip Home, we should reap all the advantages we can. Perhaps there is only one, apart from having another very comfortable house to stay in, but that is a big one. He can make some money for us."

This was only the second time she had mentioned this, and in consequence she was rather agreeably surprised to find that

her husband grasped it. He even appeared to think about it, and suggested an amendment, though the process required, it seemed to Gladys, miles of quarter-decking.

"Eh, what?" he said. "Something South African? Put in twopence and get out fourpence, with a dividend in the interim? By Gad, yes! But you'd better get it out of him, Gladys, not I. Lovely woman, you know; a man tells everything to lovely woman. Don't tell me."

This had never occurred to Gladys, and she always respected anyone to whom things occurred before they occurred to her.

"How very simple," she said, "and much better than my suggestion. I suppose it was so simple that it never occurred to me."

Ellington chuckled, and as the conversation was over, sat down again to read the evening paper, which had just come in. He read the morning paper all the morning, and talked of it at lunch, and the evening paper all evening, and talked of it at dinner; these two supplied him with his mental daily bread. All the same, he never seemed well-informed even about current events; he managed somehow to miss the point of all the news he read, and could never distinguish between Kuroki and Kuropatkin.

Three days had passed since Madge had had her last sitting for her portrait, and those three days had passed for her in a sort of dream of disquietude which was not wholly pain. She had not seen Evelyn since, and scarcely Philip, for he had been harder worked than usual, and last night, when he was to have

dined with them, had sent word that he could not possibly get there in time. They were to go to the theatre afterwards, and he said he would join them there. She had upbraided him laughingly for his desertion of them, telling him that he put the pleasure of business higher than the pleasure of her society. For retort he had the fact that when he was not at work he was never anywhere else but in her society, whereas two days ago, when he was free one morning, she refused to ride with him because she was to give a sitting to Evelyn. But the moment he had said this he was sorry for it, for Madge had flushed, and turned from him, biting her lip. But though he was sorry for the undesigned pain he had apparently given her, his heart could not but sing to him. She could not bear such a word from him even in jest.

But this had not been the cause of Madge's disquietude; Philip's remark indeed had, so far as it alone was concerned, gone in at one ear but to come out at the other. In its passage through it had touched something that made her wince with sudden pain. But the pain passed, and a warmth, a glow of some secret kind, remained. Disquieting it was, but not painful, except that at intervals a sort of pity and remorse would stab her, and at other times her heart, like Philip's, could not but sing to her for the splendour of love which was beginning to dawn. She could not help that dawn coming, and she could not help glorying in its light.

Of what should be the practical issue she did not at once think. It was but three weeks ago that she had promised to marry Philip,

and then her honesty had made her tell him that she gave him liking, esteem, affection, all that she was conscious that it was in her power to give. And now, when she knew that she was possessed of more than these, and that the new possession was not hers to give him, a long day of indecision, this day on which in the evening they were to dine together with Gladys Ellington, had been hers. But gradually, slowly, with painful gropings after light, she had made up her mind.

She had no choice – her choice was already made, and all duty, all obedience, all honour, called her to fulfil the promise she had made, to fulfil it, too, in no niggardly lip-service sense of the word, but to fulfil it loyally. She must turn her back to the dawn which had come too late, she must never look there, she must for ever avert her eyes from it. Above all, she must do all that lay in her power to prevent that brightness growing. She must, in fact, not see Evelyn again of her own free will.

Then the difficulties, each to be met and overcome, began to swarm thick about her. First and foremost there was the portrait, for which she was engaged to give him a sitting to-morrow. That, at any rate, as far as this particular sitting was concerned, was easily managed, a note of three lines expressing regret did that. This, however, was only a temporary measure, it but put off for this one occasion the necessity of meeting what lay before her. For she knew she must not sit to him again; she dared not risk that, she must not give this strange new rapture in her heart the food that would make it grow. Yet, again, she must not act like

a mad-woman, and what reasonable cause could she give for so strange a freak? Perhaps if she went there with Philip, or if she took her mother with her.

Yet that did not dispose of the question. Evelyn was one of her future husband's warmest friends. In the ordinary course of things they must often meet, but till she had conquered herself, made sure of herself, such meetings were impossible. And how could she ever be sure of herself, to whom had come this utterly unlooked for thing, a thing so unlooked for that only a few weeks before she had consented to its being dismissed as a practical impossibility?

Then came a thought which, for the very shame of it, was bracing. Not by word or look or sign had Evelyn ever showed that he regarded her with the faintest feeling that answered hers. She remembered well the rise of the full moon on the terrace of Philip's house above Pangbourne, how he had called attention to it, merely to point out that it was not in drawing, how she herself on that occasion had noticed how different he was to the ordinary moonlight-walker. No hint of sentiment, no sign of the vaguest desire towards the most harmless flirtation had appeared in him then, nor had any appeared since. While she was sitting to him, half the time he scowled at her, the other half he bubbled with boyish nonsense. For very shame she must turn her back on the dawn.

Dinner was to be early to-night, as the objective was Melba and the opera, and her maid came in to tell her that dressing-time

was already overstepped. She got up, but paused for a moment at the window, looking out from Buckingham Gate over the blue haze that overhung St. James' Park, driving her resolution home. She half-pitied, half-spurned herself, telling herself at one moment that it was hard that she had to suffer thus, at another that she was despicable for thinking of suffering when her road was so clearly marked for her. If what had happened was not her fault, still less should there be any fault of hers in what should happen. Clearly the future was in her own control; of the future she could make what she would.

Her mother was not coming with her to-night; indeed, she seldom wasted the golden evening hours at the opera, when there was a rubber of bridge so certainly at her command, and Madge went into the drawing-room to wish her good-night before she set off. Prosperity – and the last three weeks seemed to Lady Ellington to be most prosperous – had always a softening effect on her, and she was particularly gracious to her daughter, since Madge was responsible for so large a part of these auspicious events.

"So you're just off, dear," she said. "Dear me, you are rather late, and I mustn't keep you. But give my love to Philip, and let him see you home, and if I am in – you can ask them at the door – bring him in for a few minutes. And don't forget your sitting with Mr. Dundas to-morrow."

"Ah, I have put that off," said Madge, "I am rather busy!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.