

Mr. Moffatt

Cobb, Chester Francis (1899-1943)

A digital text sponsored by
Australian Literature Electronic Gateway

University of Sydney Library

Sydney, Australia

2002



<http://setis.library.usyd.edu.au/oztexts>
© University of Sydney Library. The texts and images are not to be used
for commercial purposes without permission

Source Text:

Prepared from the print edition published by George Allen & Unwin
London 1925

All quotation marks are retained as data.

First Published: 1925

setis australian etexts novels 1910-1939

Mr. Moffatt

London

George Allen & Unwin

1925

Contents

	PAGE
CHAPTER ONE	
I.—THE CASH BOX	1
II.—BACON	11
III.—HIS TONIC	24
IV.—HEAD	39
V.—HIS SELF-CONTROL	59
CHAPTER TWO	
I.—SUNDAY MORNING	75
II.—HIS WORSHIP	89
III.—HIS JUDGMENT	104
CHAPTER THREE	
I.—IN THE MIRROR	119
II.—TAXI	129
CHAPTER FOUR	
I.—HIS RETURN	141
II.—FLORENCE	147
III.—HIS IMAGINATION	153
IV.—ST. MARGARET'S	160
CHAPTER FIVE	
I.—HIS LUNCH	172
II.—PICTURES	183
III.—HIS DECISION	190
IV.—OUT OF HIS DREAM	196
V.—TIDINGS FOR HIM	203
VI.—THE SOUND OF HIS FOOTSTEPS	210
VII.—HIS CHILD	217
VIII.—HIS MEMORIES	227
CHAPTER SIX	
I.—THE WEIGHT IN HIS HEART	232
II.—HIS IMPORTANCE	250
CHAPTER SEVEN	
I.—HIS REFUGE	261
II.—THE RAIN	264
III.—ONE AFTERNOON	269
IV.—THE MIXTURE	282
V.—ERNEST	287
VI.—NAOMI	295
VII.—HIS SURRENDER	303
CHAPTER EIGHT	
CONCLUSION	308

Mr. Moffatt

Chapter One

I. The Cash-Box

He carried the heavy steel cash-box in one hand as he entered the dispensary and with the other shut the door to the residence behind him. He was half whistling, half hissing, the first bars of Mendelssohn's "Spring Song."

On the right the water filter, the porcelain sink with its brass faucet, above which the circular brushes on long wire handles; then the telephone, then the window, its lower pane of vari-coloured glass and worked into it the words "Dispensing Department."

On the left the rows and rows of uniform bottles containing liquids, powders, crystals of all tints, and labelled in abbreviated Latin with black letters against a gilt square. Below the bottle shelves, the rows of small square drawers, each with a green cut-glass knob, and inscribed in mysterious-looking Latin. Then the cupboards and show-cases with empty bottles cleaned ready for prescriptions, the proprietary pills and ointments, the brightly-cartoned tooth pastes and shaving soaps, the face creams, the shampoo powders. Then the bandages, the cotton-wool, the embrocations, the castor oil, the hair tonics, the nerve tonics, the infants' foods, the cough mixtures, the fruit salts, the throat pastilles.

In front of him the partition eight feet high, concealing the dispensary department from the public part of the shop. Along the partition the bench, part of it covered with marble. On the left-hand side of the bench the desk with the prescription book and the day book. On the marble portion of the bench the small brass scales and the row of conical graduated measuring glasses. Beneath the bench the mortars and pestals, the saucepans, the gas ring with the rubber tube attached to it. Then the shelves containing the *British Pharmacopoeia* and other reference books. Next to it the shelf with the ointment slab and the box for waste paper. Above the bench, over the desk, the compartments containing bill-heads— "Dr. to J. J. Moffatt, M.P.S., The Claverley Pharmacy, Six Ways Cross, Claverley, Sydney"— and the envelopes bearing in one corner a photograph of the Claverley Pharmacy in dark blue ink. Then the shelves with more rows and rows of bottles of liquids, powders, and crystals, each with its Latin indication of the contents. On the right the shelves containing sticks of red sealing wax, the box of matches, and the small gas jet with the fish-tail burner.

Beyond the desk on the left the bench merging into the glass counter with the expensive boxes of perfume, the fragrant toilet soaps, the hair brushes,

the safety razors, the small cameras, displayed for customers' eyes. At the near end of the counter, next to the desk, the nickel cash-register, and in the window of it the red ticket, "No Sale." Beside it the large set of brass scales, the weights piled in a pyramid between the pans. Beneath it the drawers containing labels and the drawer containing corks. . . .

Half whistling, half hissing, "Spring Song," he plumped down the cash-box with a metallic rattle of the contents on the marble-topped portion of the bench. There was a faint smell of dust, and in a beam of sunlight which streamed through the top of the dispensary window and made the brass corners of the cash-box glitter, dust-particles chased and chased. The air was warm. He looked up and blinked at the sunlight from the blue sky outside, walked to the window, and drew the spring blind down over the upper pane.

Returning to the cash-box, he felt in a trouser pocket for the ring on which hung the little key to unlock it.

. . . I'll bring the paper off the counter, he thought. . . .

And let the key drop into his pocket again.

He walked past the cash-register, between the glass counter and the glass-doored show-cases displaying from tooth pastes to throat pastilles. There were letters on the counter, but no newspaper.

. . . Postman's been with the letters, he reflected. But where's the paper? Boy left it on one of the chairs? . . .

Mr. Moffatt gathered up the letters, walked round the counter into the public portion of the shop, and found the newspaper, looking fresh and smelling inky, on one of the two chairs that stood beside the counter.

He picked it up.

. . . *The Daily Telegraph*, went on his mind. Sydney: February 16th, 1924—22 pages. One penny. R.E.E. special tennis racket, 85s. Summary. Weather forecast. Cloudy, sultry, and unsettled generally over New South Wales. . . .

He smelt dust.

. . . This dust should have settled before now, his thoughts continued. A chemist's shop should smell of perfumes, not dust. Does the boy sprinkle enough water on the floor before he sweeps it? . . .

With the newspaper and the letters in his hand, Mr. Moffatt walked out on to the asphalt pavement.

The other five corners besides the one on which his own shop stood. The two hotels, the grocer's, the painter and decorator's, the wood and coal merchant's, each on its corner. The double set of tram-car lines in the street which one side of the pharmacy faced. The vista of this street for two hundred yards with shops on either side of it. The vistas of private

residences lining the other five streets.

He looked to the left.

His big display window facing the tram-car lines, and "J. J. Moffatt, M.P.S., Dispensing Chemist," printed in neat gold letters at one side. The profusion of bright cartons and gaily printed cards professing the excellence of Eezy-Kwick Shaving Stick. In the centre of the window the huge male face cut out of paste-board looking happy beneath its extravagant foam of bubbling lather.

The errand-boy, Ernest, standing on a frontier line formed by an area of swept pavement next to an area of pavement yet unswept, leaning his chin on the end of the broom handle, and gazing longingly at an electric tram-car, full of passengers, moving off noisily from its stopping-place opposite to the pharmacy on its way towards town.

Mr. Moffatt frowned on seeing the boy.

. . . Always day-dreaming, he reflected. Young scallawag! Air's very warm. Trams wouldn't make so much clatter if those rails were repaired. Too many dents in them. Worn out. I must talk to that young Ernest. Smart-looking motorcar. Cyril would have known the make of it. Going to be a hot day. . . .

But there were people passing to and fro, and he did not want to attract attention by reprimanding the boy on the pavement. He did not want to be seen being angry. He turned and looked in the opposite direction where another tram was approaching. He affected not to have noticed the boy. Beginning again at the opening bars of "Spring Song," rendered by hissing between his teeth, he re-entered the shop.

In front of him the glass counter, with the cash-register and the brass scales. At an obtuse angle to the counter, the partition which shut off the shop from the dispensary behind it. In the centre of the shop side of this partition, the big mirror. At either side of it the show-cases containing the bottles of scent and brilliantine. Over the top of the left-hand show-case the word "Dispensing" painted on glass: over the top of the right-hand show-case, uniform with the other, the word "Department." More show-cases beneath the mirror, displaying sponges, bay rum, olive oil, eucalyptus oil, cocoanut oil, each in sixpenny and shilling sizes. On the extreme left of the partition, the doorway into the dispensary.

Mr. Moffatt was going to walk through this doorway. But he paused for a moment to look into the big mirror.

A tallish figure in a black alpaca coat. Broad of build. The trousers needed pressing, and exhibited grease marks in the region of the seat, where a forefinger covered with some ingredient of pills or ointment had frequently been wiped. The shoes were laced carelessly. The head was

large and well covered with white hair. There was a white moustache which drooped over the mouth and was tipped with light brown where tobacco smoke had been exhaled. The forehead was capacious and high, and not unduly wrinkled. The eyes were blue and small. The complexion denoted good health.

He brushed a piece of white cotton off a lapel of his coat, pulled his tie tighter, stretched his neck out of his collar, and, still hissing "Spring Song," walked into the dispensary again.

He slapped the newspaper and the letters on to the desk, and felt in his trouser pocket again for the key of his cash-box. But his eyes were on the columns of the front page of the newspaper.

. . . Shipping. Burns, Philp, and Co., Ltd. Passages for England by the following routes. Musical instruments. Paling's easy terms. You'd better open the cash-box at once. Fix up the change in the register. Customers will be coming in. Get the change put right, then you can look at the paper.

. . .

He shuffled the letters and ran his eye over the envelopes.

. . . Invoice, invoice, invoice. Edgington, Angier, and Head, Ltd. The quality printers. What will this be? Circular, I suppose. . . .

From this envelope he extracted a card.

. . . Our Mr. Head will call on you this morning. Any orders you place with him will have our immediate and careful attention. Dear Moffatt, Will be along between 11 and 12. How are you? Albert Head. Don't leave the cash-box till the last minute. Breakfast will be ready soon. No time then. Old Head. Suppose he'll want me to have a drink with him. Think it's about time I did the shouting, though. Good mind to ask him inside. There's plenty of whisky in the decanter. Summary. Tutankhamen's tomb. In connection with the sudden closing of Tutankhamen's tomb, interesting legal questions have arisen. Mr. Carter claims he is entitled to half the treasures, as the tomb had been previously robbed. If a customer comes in you'll have to give change direct out of the cash-box. You know how unsatisfactory that is, because you're sure to forget to register the sale. Get the register ready now. Don't wait till customers arrive. I know old Head is fond of sherry. Sherry I have in there is quite decent stuff. I'll offer him some. Professor J. D. Stewart, of the Sydney University, says the tick menace should be fought strenuously. Oak canteen of stainless cutlery complete for £16. He expresses the opinion that the federal government should help New South Wales to check the pest. It must be very near breakfast time. You know you get annoyed when you have to waste time bothering about change if a customer calls you away from breakfast. Who's this letter from? Don't know the envelope. Oh, I know. Yes, it is: Dickson,

the auctioneer. What does he want? Oh, I suppose it's about the picture. He's sending it back, of course. Perhaps I would have done better to have sent it to a city auction-room. Might have known I wouldn't have got much of a bid in the suburbs. What's he say? February 21st, and so forth. They'll be calling you any moment to go in to breakfast. Get that change put right. Dear Mr. Moffatt, In accordance with your instructions, I have arranged for the picture which you submitted at my sale-rooms and which failed to realise your reserve, to be re-delivered to you to-morrow (Saturday). Trusting it will reach you safely and hoping to be favoured with your future commands, which will receive my, and so on and so on. Bothering nuisance, this picture. Don't want it back, and yet I can't afford to let it go for a mere fleabite. Don't know what to do about it. Is that somebody coming in? Nuisance. The Railway Commissioners have approved of later trains being run to suburbs on Sunday nights. . . .

Smiling, he walked round to the back of the counter. There was a small girl at the other side of it.

"Well, missy, what can I get for you?"

"Please, I want a packet of salts."

"Epsom salts, I suppose you mean. One packet?"

"Yes, please."

"Where's your tuppence?"

Two pennies were pushed over the top of the counter.

"Never do that, little girl," said Mr. Moffatt. "Can't you see it scratches the glass?"

He rubbed his hand over the route taken by the coins, and bent his head the better to observe any damage.

"Always put your money on here," Mr. Moffatt explained, and indicated a disc of corrugated red rubber. "That's what it's for, but people never see it. Packet of salts, eh?"

"Yes, please."

He pulled open one of the little square drawers with green glass knobs, looked in, and took out one of the labelled blue packets.

"Finest Epsom salts there are," he said, as he delivered the packet to the customer. "You won't get salts like these at the grocer's."

As the child walked out, he began again to hiss "Spring Song."

. . . Open the cash-box and put the small change into the register, proceeded his thoughts. Next customer might not give the right money. . . .

The door connecting the dispensary with the residence opened. A voice said, "Breakfast's ready, father!"

. . . Another coastal steamer, the *Benandra*, grounded at the bar at Narooma yesterday. . . .

“Yes—yes—” replied Mr. Moffatt.

. . . The mail notices will be found to-day on page 8. Slip that change into the register. Won't take a moment. Was that somebody calling me to breakfast? Twenty-five past eight. Was it someone? *Pals*, the Australian boys' paper. This week's issue contains: Study number four, the boy millionaire, the fighting trail, Clarence caught it. Hurry and put that change into the register. Don't read another line. Breakfast will be ready in a few minutes. . . .

“Oh John, don't stand there reading the paper,” said another voice from the residence doorway. “Your bacon, you know, will be stone cold.”

“Yes, yes, dear,” said Mr. Moffatt, agitatedly, and turned quickly round, though the owner of the voice had disappeared. “I'm coming at once. I didn't know breakfast was ready.”

. . . Did somebody call me before? Better leave the cash-box now. Hurry in to breakfast. . . .

He put the box into the locker under the desk, and fastened the door against it. He was hissing “Spring Song” again as he walked to the shop entrance and swung to the glass panelled doors that rang a bell when they were pushed open.

“Hiss—hiss, hiss, hiss, hiss, hiss, hiss, hiss, hiss—(pause)—hiss, hiss—(pause)—hiss, hiss—”

Then he opened the back dispensary door leading to the residence, made it stay open by twisting a door jamb against it, and passed out.

II. Bacon

Across the linoleum-covered passage and through the doorway opposite. The varnished door with a white porcelain handle. French windows to the left, through which the verandah, and beyond the verandah bright sunshine and the lawn. The long room, divided by an archway, where folding doors had once been. The far end of the room the sitting room, with windows looking over the narrow tiled verandah on to the street where the electric tram-cars thundered. The near end of the room the dining-room.

The white cloth. A vase of pink and white carnations in the centre.

His wife, Florence, at the far end of the table. Middle-aged and inclined to stoutness. Strangers had remarked, “She must have been *very* pretty when she was a girl.” But Florence, with her full head of dark hair, is still very pretty. The tea-pot, the milk jug, the sugar-basin hem her in.

Naomi, his daughter, at one side. Her hair brown and bobbed. An intelligent-looking face, keen, alert. She is scraping the last portions of white out of an egg shell, holding the shell in one hand, the small silver

spoon in the other. She is also munching toast.

A vacant chair—his. Rashers of fat, juicy bacon on his plate. He wanted to be tasting it, eating it.

“Good morning, Naomi,” he said.

Naomi postponed the thrusting of a spoonful of egg into her mouth and responded, “Good morning, father!” He sat.

“You know, dear,” remarked Mrs. Moffatt, as she poured steaming, golden tea into a cup, “you can't expect your bacon to be warm if you don't come immediately.”

“I came at once, dear,” he said.

“Didn't you hear Naomi call you before?”

“No, I heard nobody call me until I heard you.”

“Oh father! You answered me. You said, ‘Yes, yes!’ ”

“Did I?”

. . . Suppose I must have, he reflected. Seems a lot of fat on this bacon. Don't want to be bilious. Oh I won't be bilious. I want mustard. . . .

He reached for the mustard pot, and tapped mustard loudly from the tiny yellow spoon on to the edge of his plate.

“Thank *you!*” he exclaimed as he received his tea from Mrs. Moffatt by way of Naomi. It was in a big moustache cup, with a bridge across to keep his drooping moustache out of the contents.

“Sugar in it?” he asked, as he began to stir the tea.

“Yes, I put in sugar for you,” Mrs. Moffatt informed.

“Beautiful morning, isn't it?” he remarked as he took a slice of bread, then cut a piece of bacon, and pasted mustard across it.

“Going to be hot, I think,” observed Mrs. Moffatt.

“Yes, I'm afraid so.”

He chewed bacon with relish.

. . . I wasn't addressing myself to Florence then, he reflected as he did so. Naomi will never enter into conversation with me unless I address her by name. She doesn't seem to want to talk. She won't join in conversation at meal times unless either Florence or I happen to mention something wrong about new ideas of school teaching, or something that doesn't favour the Labour party, or show how we misunderstand some new theory or something. Then she's quick to put us in our places. This is very nice bacon. Better not ask how much a pound. Suppose it's still dear. . . .

“Is this from a new piece of bacon?” he asked, as he cut another strip and plastered it with mustard.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Moffatt. “Do you like it?”

“Very nice. Same place, I suppose?”

“Yes, I got it at Mr. Kinsley's.”

. . . I wonder does Naomi feel sensitive about listening to talk about bacon, he ruminated. Surely not. I don't want to hurt her feelings. But I don't really think we said anything then that might by any chance upset her. How healthy she looks! The very picture of health. She, at any rate, doesn't need meat to keep herself strong and well. Still, I don't see myself doing without meat. Why should I? Of course to Naomi it's disgusting to kill animals and eat them. But why make myself miserable? Meat suits me. I don't say some people can't do very well without it provided they eat a lot of cheese and nuts and eggs. But I could never make a breakfast without bacon. Never. And fancy never eating another underdone chop or another big juicy steak. A-a-a-ah! I could never leave off meat. Beautiful bacon, this. . . .

He cut off another portion, crushed his teeth into it, and rolled it in his mouth. He pulled a piece of bread from the slice on his plate, forked it round the pool of bacon fat, then popped it too into his mouth. Crush, crush, crush! Delicious!

. . . Florence with that blue silk blouse of hers, his mind went on. I think I like her best in blue. I seem to feel more in love with her when she wears something blue. I don't know. I shouldn't think that. I wonder if it *is* that I love Florence as a physical body or a set of clothes, and not for her character. Ridiculous. I'm sure it can't be so. I would have grown tired of seeing her body by this time—nearly thirty years. Yet it's hard to say. I don't know. Oh I'm sure my love for Florence is deeper than that. I'm sure it is. You know it is. Yes, I know it is. I know I know it is. . . .

“Have you heard anything more about the picture, John?” asked Mrs. Moffatt, as she spread butter with a loud scraping noise on toast. “When they're sending it back or anything?”

He gulped down a partly masticated piece of bacon and bread in order to say:

“Got a letter this morning. Dickson says he's sending it to-day sometime. I don't fancy he said exactly when. Why?”

“I was wondering where it had better go.”

“I'll tell the men to leave it in the sitting room. I think that'll be as good a place as any.”

“It may be a nuisance there, you know, dear.”

“Oh, it won't be there long. That's the only suitable place. It's so big. I'm really thinking about sending it to a city auctioneer. I think perhaps it was a mistake to send such a big picture to a local sale-room. But I don't know exactly.”

. . . Might ask Head what he thinks would be best, he reflected. He's keen on pictures. . . .

“Albert Head's coming to-day,” he announced. “I think I might ask *his* advice. He knows a good deal about pictures, the value of them, and all that sort of thing. He paints a bit himself, you know.”

“Yes, I think you told me. Yes, I should ask him.”

. . . Didn't I just say I was *going* to ask him? his mind went on. Why put it forward as a suggestion of her own? Doesn't matter. . . .

He masticated more bacon and bread, and had a drink of tea. As he swallowed the tea with his face upraised, he looked at Naomi, who was lifting a thin finger of toast and marmalade into her mouth.

. . . You look beautiful and sweet this morning, Naomi, were the words in his mind. I'm not going to tell you so, but you do. She looks so clean and so fresh, so alive. She's so neat. White silk blouse is so very white, her skin is so clear, her eyes are so bright, she has such a splendid healthy colour in her cheeks. Her hair is so neat. Then her hands are so beautifully formed and efficient-looking. The long, delicately shaped fingers. There's nothing elaborate about her, somehow. I think that's one of the things I like about the way Naomi dresses. There's a simplicity about her. No bangles or necklaces or rings—none of those barbaric metal or mineral arrangements. She is just herself. I wouldn't say that her face was beautiful in the ordinary sense. But there is beauty there. Her keenness and intelligence are beautiful. Her simple form of dress is beautiful. I love you, Naomi. I love you and admire you. I wonder, would you be really surprised if you were to be told that? Somehow I've never been able to be myself with Naomi. Whenever I speak to her I get self-conscious. I can be gay and frank with Florence, but when Naomi appears I become awkward. I don't seem able to be at my best. I don't know why it is. No doubt it's something due to me. I don't know, I don't know. I feel as if I have to be serious with Naomi, and I'm not naturally serious except in the background of what I say. I'm just unnatural with Naomi. She never sees me as I really am. I can't open out to her. I wish very much that I could throw off this shyness or whatever it is in front of her. It seems absurd that a man should feel awkward before his own daughter. As a matter of fact there is something about her manner that makes me feel so small. She makes me feel a terrible ignoramus, somehow. I don't know why that should be. I feel in a way outside her spheres of thought, inferior, just— well, just father. Yes, I'm just father. That's just it.

. . . .

“Are you going anywhere to-night, Naomi?” asked Mrs. Moffatt, as Mr. Moffatt consumed the remainder of his bacon, and put the greasy plate on one side.

“You *know* I'll be out,” replied Naomi.

“I don't know until you tell me.”

“Well, how many times have I to tell you?”

“I think once ought to be sufficient.”

“Well, I'm sure I've told you dozens of times that I go to a meeting on the third Saturday in every month.”

“But you can't expect me to remember every time. Where is it you're going to?”

“Oh, surely you know, mother. Have I got to keep telling you every time? You've got a head like a sieve.”

. . . Florence got a head like a sieve! thought Mr. Moffatt. What language is this? . . .

“I suppose it's the Service Society, is it?”

“Of course it is.”

“Then you'll want an early tea?”

“Yes, I think you'd better have tea early for me. I'm going to a dramatic recital this afternoon, but I'll be home soon after five. So if you'd have my tea ready, say, about half-past five, that would do.”

. . . Yes, I know I'd like to suggest to Naomi that she should get her own tea when she wants it early, Mr. Moffatt reflected. But for the sake of peace I don't. And anyhow Florence doesn't seem to mind getting two separate teas. You know if you really want to save Florence work, you can say that you'll be willing to have tea early as well. Florence won't suggest that, because she knows that you've made such a fuss before about having meals at any other but regular set times. Oh, I know, I know. I suppose I ought to say something about not minding an early tea to-night. Oh, I don't know. If I thought Florence really minded . . . She's never *said* it makes so much extra work for her. She doesn't mind—I'm sure of that. No, the thing is that between six and half-past-six is the quietest time I can get to have tea. If we were to have it at half-past five I'd be up and down, up and down, attending to the shop through the whole blessed meal. That's the point, really. It isn't that I mind. If I knew for a fact that it was actually causing a great deal more work to Florence, which was too much for her and which could only be saved her by my saying that I wouldn't mind if we all had tea early, and if I thought . . .

“This meeting of the Service Society, then,” inquired Mrs. Moffatt, pouring herself another cup of tea, “is held regularly every month, is it?”

“Not *this* meeting—obviously. *A* meeting, yes,” replied Naomi, munching toast and marmalade.

. . . Not *this* meeting—a meeting, went on Mr. Moffatt's mind. Oh, I see. I'm very dull, and you're so very smart, Naomi. Always on the alert. I suppose you think your mother and me terrible old-fashioned dotards. I'm sure you think *I*'m one, anyhow. I wonder do you *really* think that? Yes,

I'm sure of it. I'm sure that's *just what you think*. You think I'm a stupid old dullard. Yes, you think I could never be expected to understand the things that occupy your mind. Father could never comprehend these things, and you haven't the patience to help him. How long ago is it since I asked you were you finding your new method of school teaching successful? But you just couldn't be bothered explaining things to me. You were too impatient. "Oh yes, it's all right!" I suppose I should have seized you by the shoulders and said, "Look here, I've asked you a simple question, because I'm really interested in the work you're doing at your school, and you've no right to send me packing with an answer like that." But, there, it's just my nature that I allow you to treat me in this way. I feel too sensitive about your slights to make any complaint. The thing is that I feel that if you don't *want* to tell me about your life and your activities, I certainly don't want to force you. If I can't have your spontaneous love, I don't want any. Then there's this Service Society you belong to. Goodness knows I've dropped enough hints of my interest in it and what it stands for and why you've joined it. But you've never once told me anything about it. All I know I've heard from Florence. Florence doesn't let you slight her, but I *do* let you slight me. Anyhow, I still don't feel inclined to say anything about it to you. Suppose it's some pride in me that makes me like this. If you want your father to be in the dark about your new ideas and so forth, very well, let it be so. This Service Society, though, seems to be one with high ideals of service to humanity. You feel you want to ally yourself with such an organisation. All right, I am proud of you for that. By all means serve the world. It's a splendid ideal for you to respond to. But why the unwillingness to tell me about it? I don't mind your belonging to the Service Society. I don't mind your having new ideas about education, or about anything else. But what makes you think I'm not fit to discuss these ideas with you? I don't know. Perhaps I *am* a back number; and the thing is you're the current issue. . . .

He was spreading marmalade on his buttered toast. Mrs. Moffatt was eating toast and marmalade. Naomi was wiping her mouth with her serviette; and now she was folding her serviette; and now she was saying, "Excuse me!" and getting up from the table.

She lifted her chair against the table, and disappeared through the open French windows.

. . . And yet, Mr. Moffatt's thoughts proceeded, no matter how you treat me, Naomi, I love you. I love you as every father must love his child, even though she *is* twenty-four. Of course you think you're old; but you're still only a child to me. In my mind I still see you as a kiddie of seven or eight years old, in a little blue print frock with a lace pinafore. However you're

separated from me in your ideas, nevertheless that splendid young body of yours is made from part of my body, and you are precious to me. Doubly precious, since Cyril was taken from me. That bloody dawn. Those bloody sands at Anzac Cove. Those boats run up to the beach, and the lads jumping out of them into the water and the barbed wire, then racing up the sands like furious animals bent on carnage. And Cyril! And now that young body—made from part of my own body—rots in the earth above the shores of Gallipoli. Why? Oh yes, on the surface an answer is easy. He was killed, and there his body lies. But there's something deeper to it than that. No use thinking: you get no further with it. But it makes me love you passionately, Naomi. My child—my child that lives! What an amazing thing it is that a man can love a woman, and can give to her a part of his own life, and that then there can grow in her a living child, which comes forth from her and lives independently. What an astounding thing. And what a beautiful act is the act of intercourse when it is performed in love. How beautiful that I can pour the essence of my body into my dear one's body. I love you, Florence, my darling, and there in Naomi and in Cyril we see the children of our love. . . .

He was stirring his tea; then slowly he drank it.

“Another cup of tea, dear?” asked Mrs. Moffatt.

“Can you give me just half a cup?” he petitioned, rising to pass his cup over the red and white carnations to her.

“I'll see if I can manage it.”

He munched more toast, then stretched his hand over to receive his cup back again. He looked into it.

. . . Quite three-quarters full. It doesn't seem possible to pour out just half a cupful. Of course, Florence won't believe that I really want only half a cup. . . .

He stirred the tea reflectively, then ate toast again.

. . . I don't know why I should always keep thinking about how Cyril was going to be such a help in the shop, he mused. It's all in the past now. Of course he was going to be so popular with the customers, and the takings were going to mount and mount. He was going to bring new ideas into the business, have that front window made deeper, instal a soda fountain, send out circulars and advertise in other ways. Then it was going to be, “Now, dad, you take yourself off this morning. I don't want you here. You can give me a hand for an hour or so in the afternoon and evening if I can't hold things on my own. But you take things easy.” Well—yes—I know. But—well—things didn't happen that way, that's all. . . .

He had finished his toast and was drinking the last of his tea when the sound of the bell on the swing entrance doors to the shop indicated the

entering of a customer.

“Finish your tea first, dear,” suggested Mrs. Moffatt.

. . . Wasn't I going to do that, anyway? went on his mind. . . .

He swallowed his tea, and wiped his mouth.

“I'll fold your serviette,” Mrs. Moffatt volunteered. “Don't be in a hurry. They can wait.”

. . . Who *is* in a hurry? Oh I know she means to help me. . . .

“All right, dear,” he forced himself to say.

He was feeling a little irritated as he rose and left the room. But in the passage between the dining room door and the dispensary door he conquered his irritation, and began to hiss Paderewski's “Minuet.”

“Hiss, hiss, hiss, tiddle-ee-dee-dee hiss hiss, tiddle-ee-dee-dee hiss hiss, tiddle-ee-dee-dee hiss hiss, tiddle-ee-dee-dee hiss hiss, dee-dee-dee hiss hiss, dee-dee-dee hiss hiss—hiss hiss—”

III. His Tonic

Into the dispensary. He shut the dispensary door, and there behind it was the snowy-haired young Ernest, the errand-boy, putting his broom into the corner.

Mr. Moffatt sniffed. An unpleasant smell.

. . . Always a smell round that lad, he reflected, as he walked to the back of the counter. Can't wash himself. I don't like to go near him. . . .

Mr. Moffatt prepared himself to greet the customer with a cheery “Good morning!” but the shop was empty—there was no customer. He felt cheated.

“Was that you, Ernest, just came in?” he asked, returning to the dispensary.

“Yes, sir,” replied Ernest, meekly, and turned to the sink, reached down one of the circular brushes on long wire handles, and began rinsing and brushing a bottle. He did not look at Mr. Moffatt.

“Well, why don't you call out when you come in? You know when those doors are shut I'm at my breakfast. I thought it was somebody coming in.”

Ernest continued shaking water in the bottle and pumping the long brush in and out of it.

. . . Don't seem able to make an impression on the lad, reflected Mr. Moffatt. Don't seem able to get *at* him. He won't look at me. I don't want to be angry with him. But I don't seem able to get *at* him. . . .

“Do you hear, Ernest?” he added. “I've told you before, you know.”

Ernest nodded his head over his bottle.

. . . I feel I haven't made the *slightest* impression on him. He's like a

mummy. . . .

“You understand that, now, don't you, Ernest?” Ernest nodded more.

. . . To-morrow I know he'll do exactly the same thing again. A stupid boy! Dull—wooden—petrified. I don't know what to do with him. Words don't seem to penetrate his brain. . . .

Mr. Moffatt drew a deep breath and turned to his desk.

. . . Yes, and I ought to speak to him about dawdling outside on the pavement. I ought to make it clear that I know he wastes his time. But it's hopeless. He'll just nod his head and say, “Yes, sir,” or “Yes, all right,” and to-morrow he'll do exactly the same thing again. He wants a good shake. He's half asleep. I don't know what I can do. Might be as well if I didn't speak about his dawdling outside. Give a better chance for the instruction about calling when he rings the bell to sink in. The thing is he wants more life in him—more punch—more verve—more go—vigour—alertness—briskness! He wants to give more attention to things, keep his mind more on his job, be more keen, more acute, more active. He wants tightening up, bracing up. . . .

Mr. Moffatt thrust his hand smartly into his trouser pocket, jerked out his key ring, opened the locker under the desk, pulled out the cash-box, slammed it on the bench, unlocked the lid, raised it, spread a handful of coins out on the bench, and began at once to count out £2 worth of silver and copper as change.

Ssss-lick, sss-lick! went the coins as he pulled them over the marble top of the bench into his hand, counting them like a bank clerk, then piling each size of coin in a separate tower until he had the right amount. Then he carried the silver and copper towers to the back of the counter, pressed one of the typewriter-like keys on the cash-register marked “No Sale,” a bell rang, and the till popped out and hit him in the waist-coat. He recoiled slightly, then dropped each tower of coins into a separate compartment of the till. Click! He had shut it again, and that business was done.

He returned to the dispensary, locked the cash-box, slipped it into the locker under the desk, fastened the door of the locker and dropped the key ring back into his trouser pocket.

“Hiss—hiss, hiss, hiss, hiss, hiss, hiss, hiss—Ev—rimorn I bring thee Vi—lets!” he muttered. “Hum—hum, hum, hum, hum, hum, hum. . . .”

. . . Don't know the rest, he reflected. Now what's this youth supposed to be doing? Saturday. Florence will want him later on for some messages. But I don't think he's done his dusting yet. . . .

“Done your dusting yet, Ernest?” he asked, turning round from the desk.

Ernest was still rinsing and scrubbing. He shook his head, and muttered, “No.”

“Then you'd better get on with it. Leave that bottle. I have plenty of clean bottles. Do your dusting.”

. . . He ought to know by this time that he has to dust the place every morning, Mr. Moffatt's thoughts proceeded. He's been here over three weeks. A very dull boy. . . .

Mr. Moffatt took the newspaper from where it lay across the desk, and began slowly to turn over the pages.

. . . Dress and fashion. Amusements. Tourist and health resorts. Poultry. Strike threat. How slowly the boy moves! And I wish he wouldn't come near me. That smell from him is awful. I've half a mind to speak to him about it. Slowly, oh so slowly, he gets his duster out of the drawer. . . .

“Do the counter first, Ernest,” instructed Mr. Moffatt. “Always begin there. But move away somewhere else if a customer comes in. You understand?”

Ernest disappeared into the front part of the shop to begin on the counter.

. . . Half the time he simply never answers me, Mr. Moffatt went on to reflect. I sometimes wonder if he can hear properly. Religious announcements. Meat board friction. Chairman hits out. What's this about? So and so, chairman Metropolitan Meat Industry Board—broke silence — maintained during discussion—meat board trouble—keenly criticised statements—oh, a lot of figures—so on and so on. Idle collieries. Work on Monday. Miners' decision. Motor driver fined. I don't believe he's moving any of the things off the counter to dust. No, he's not. . . .

“You want to dust under those cartons, you know, Ernest,” said Mr. Moffatt, looking round the corner of the desk, “and always move away the thermos flasks and that case of tooth-brushes before you begin there.”

. . . In the garden. Rural New South Wales. No, he doesn't answer. Might as well talk to a sheet of corrugated iron. Always has his mouth open, too. He breathes through his mouth. Terribly bad for him. Gives him such a stupid expression. I really believe his health might have something to do with his dullness. The Ambassadors. Luncheons. Afternoon teas. Pastry by French chefs. Dining that delights. Saturday, 25s. H'm. Relics of early Sydney. Peeps into Manly's early days. Like to read that. Look at it tonight. To the editor. North Shore bridge. French policy. Attitude to allies. M. Poincare, so and so and so and so, when France was obliged to take separate action to assure her rights, it did not enter her head to break with her allies. So on and so on. We are convinced we shall find among our allies a loyalty and good will equal to our own, and we hope at last, and so forth. Don't think there's much in that. What's this? Any change in French policy in relation to the Ruhr is not so imminent as was believed, and so on. I think myself that the French are quite right. Those Germans will not

do more than they're made to do. Luxor tomb. Oh, I read about that in the summary. Singapore base. Abandonment feared. H'm. Well, I think they're very foolish. Brutality. Separatists cut up. What's this about? Oh, some disturbance in a town in the Ruhr. The barbarity of the crowd when some separatists rushed from the burning building was almost incredible. These are the chaps who want to make the Ruhr valley a state apart from Germany. Blood-thirsty and shouting with rage the crowd cut them down with axes and knives. Tch, tch! They tore out their hearts. Goodness gracious! And cut the bodies to pieces, scattering the remains. I *say!* What a dreadful thing! Tore out their hearts. Tore out their hearts. Cut the bodies to pieces, scattering the remains. Tore out their hearts. Tch, tch! Davis cup. Probable team. Brookes, Patterson, Schlesinger, O'Hara Wood. I hope Brookes does go. Gives up. Muston beaten by hunger. By jove! they've got him, have they? The man whom the police have been hunting since Sunday for shooting the picnickers at Aberjently stared hungrily through the dairy window. Oh, they make a long story of it, and it doesn't make pleasant reading. So on and so on and so on. Poor beggar. He was starving, and asked for milk, and so he was caught. They make nearly a column out of that. Nothing much in the paper this morning. What's on the next page? A seven-guinea suit made to measure for fifty-five shillings. Oh, I don't believe it. They make such extravagant statements. Who *does* believe such rubbish? Seven-guinea suit for fifty-five—uh! The best. Tope soap is best for your skin, best for your bath, best for a thick, creamy lather, best for everything you expect in the best toilet soap. Yes, I've tried it, too, and you can get as much lather out of it as you'd get from a piece of Gorgonzola cheese. The best. Ridiculous. Why do they make these statements? Why can't they just state facts? Much more convincing. Let us have just the truth about a thing. Much more satisfactory. There goes the bell. Somebody coming in. That blessed Ernest couldn't have fastened open the swing doors when he came in before. Tch, tch! Have to tell him over and over again. Told him distinctly that when he comes in from his sweeping he's to fasten back the doors. If a customer enters while I'm at breakfast, he can call me. Fool of a boy. . . .

“Oh, good morning, Mrs. Anson!” he exclaimed as he walked round to the back of the counter to find on the opposite side of it a woman with a grave countenance.

“Good morning, sir,” replied Mrs. Anson, sadly . . . There's that Ernest still dusting the counter. I told him to move away if anyone came in. . . .

“What can I get for you this morning?” asked Mr. Moffatt, smiling.

“I want you to let me have a *good* tonic,” explained Mrs. Anson, dispiritedly.

. . . Give her my own, reflected Mr. Moffatt. . . .

"I've got a very good tonic here," he declared, and began to walk round the counter and across to the other side of the shop where he had several labelled bottles displayed round a card bearing the words, "Moffatt's Tonic. The proved remedy for every nervous disorder. Makes new blood, nourishes the brain, braces up the entire system. 2s. large bottle 2s."

"Is your husband any better?" he asked as he crossed the shop floor towards the display.

"No, sir, I fear he's not, sir," answered Mrs. Anson, shaking her head. "He seems to get no better."

. . . The *proved* remedy for *every* nervous disorder, Mr. Moffatt's mind was proceeding. Braces up the *entire* system. . . .

"Oh—I'm—is he really no—no better?" he sympathised as he reflected:

. . . Well, it *does* tone up the system—practically. . . . But the *entire* system? . . .

He grasped a bottle of tonic from among those displayed, and turned back with it towards Mrs. Anson.

"He gets worse and worse, sir," Mrs. Anson was saying.

. . . Oh, be bothered! It's a splendid tonic. As good as any on the market, were the words in Mr. Moffatt's mind.

"It's these turns of melancholy he gets, you know, sir," Mrs. Anson was continuing dejectedly. "I try to cheer him up, but the other night he was so bad, he was sitting up in bed and saying, 'I'm in hell! I'm in hell!' and grasping at the bed-clothes and going on awful. I went down to Mrs. Harrison on the bottom floor and I said to her, I said, 'Mrs. Harrison,' I said——"

. . . My God! reflected Mr. Moffatt. How many times has she told this to me? . . .

"This is a tonic I can thoroughly recommend," he put in, as if he thought she had finished speaking.

"It's something strong I want," said Mrs. Anson, taking the bottle and scrutinising it. "I'm that low. It's through me being up so many nights with me husband, trying to pacify him, and getting him to——"

. . . I'd feel annoyed with that boy not moving away from the counter if it had been anybody here but Mrs. Anson, Mr. Moffatt was thinking. . . .

"That's a very powerful tonic, Mrs. Anson," he assured her. "I put it up myself, so I know what's in it."

"What with him on me hands, and not getting me sleep," Mrs. Anson was proceeding. "And then there's George——"

"Shall I wrap it up?" asked Mr. Moffatt.

"Thanks, if you would. You know it's having to do me ordinary work

and——”

“Yes, yes,” consoled Mr. Moffatt, as he walked with the bottle to the back of the counter again. “I’m sure it’s very trying for you. Very, very trying.”

As he pulled out a sheet of white wrapping paper from a drawer he was thinking:

. . . There’s nothing that I’ve said to her about this tonic that isn’t perfectly true. It *is* a good tonic. I must order more of this medium wrapping paper. . . .

He slapped the paper on the glass counter and deftly wrapped the bottle in it.

“I’ve got me sister Annie ill, too,” Mrs. Anson was going on.

“Is that so?”

“Yes, lumbago. She was screaming the other night. Walter comes running in to me, and says, he says, he says to me——”

Mr. Moffatt had taken the wrapped bottle to the dispensary, and was applying sealing wax melted in the fish-tail gas jet to the folded ends of the paper, then pressing them down.

. . . Oh shut up, shut up! he was thinking. I don’t care a damn about your sister Annie. . . .

At the same time he was saying, “Yes, yes, oh yes, yes.”

He brought the sealed parcel back to the counter and pushed it across the glass.

“That will be two shillings, please,” he said, then drummed his fingers on the counter top and hissed the beginning of “Fiddle and I,” as Mrs. Anson opened her purse and tilted it to the light the better to see whether she had a two-shilling piece.

His thoughts ran on:

. . . Ernest has only half dusted this counter. He hasn’t moved away those things properly. There’s really nothing in that card about my tonic that I *can* alter. I don’t see what else I could put. I wonder does she feel that two shillings is a lot to pay for a bottle of tonic? It *must* be a lot for a woman like this. It makes me feel mean and grasping. Still, she wouldn’t get any other good tonic much under that price. But that’s only because the manufacturers are making such a profit. You could let her have your tonic cheaper if you wanted to. But two shillings is quite a recognised price for a tonic. Still, it costs you only about ninepence. Yes, but I *have* to make a decent profit on something—prescriptions and my own lines—or I might as well shut the shop. I really have to. There’s next to nothing to be made from other people’s patent medicines. Anyhow, I can’t ask one price for the blessed stuff from one person and another price from another. She’s not

bound to buy this tonic. As a matter of fact, if the price had troubled her, she would have said something. Oh, she'd have said *something*, right enough. . . .

“Two shillings you said, sir?” Mrs. Anson wished to confirm, and at the same time pushed a half-crown across the counter top.

. . . Might just as well not have that rubber mat for money to be put on, were the words in Mr. Moffatt's mind. Nobody sees it. It seems you can't save the glass from being scratched. . . .

“Yes, two shillings, please, Mrs. Anson. Thank you.”

He took the half-crown, pressed two keys marked respectively “2s.” and “6d.” on the cash register, up jumped two similarly marked tickets, and out flew the till. He threw in the half-crown, pulled out a sixpence, and handed it to her.

“Much obliged,” he said, as he did so.

“Thank you, sir. Good morning, sir.”

She turned away.

. . . I'd say something about hoping her husband would soon be better, Mr. Moffatt's mind went on, but if I did I'd never get her out of the shop. . . .

“Good morning, Mrs. Anson,” he returned, graciously nodding his head and smiling beamingly. . . .

Mrs. Anson had gone.

“Ernest,” said Mr. Moffatt to the boy, who was now running his duster along ledges at the back of the display window, “didn't you hear me say that I wanted you to move away from the counter if anyone came in?”

Ernest half turned towards Mr. Moffatt, nodded his head, and mumbled something about, “Very well, sir.”

“When that lady was in just now, you were going on dusting. You must remember another time.”

. . . I feel I ought to say something stronger than that. He doesn't seem to be impressed by anything I say. Perhaps if I were to explain to him that some customers don't like to have anybody dusting right under their noses . . .

“Some people——” he began, then stopped.

. . . Oh what's the use? he decided. He's a *perfect idiot* of a boy! . . .

Mr. Moffatt pulled out his handkerchief, blew his nose, and walked back to the desk in the dispensary. He took up the newspaper again.

. . . The best. Tope soap is best for your skin, best for your bath, best for . . .

He put the newspaper down, and walked through the little doorway at the side of the dispensary partition into the shop. He stopped in front of the

Moffatt's Tonic display, looked for a moment at it, then removed the card in the midst of the bottles and carried it back to the dispensary desk.

. . . The proved remedy for every nervous disorder. . . . Braces up the entire system. . . . How else *could* I put it? Let me have a piece of paper and write a few things down. Now let me think. Absolute cure for every No. How about, The best tonic for nervous disorders? Er—no. As a matter of fact there's no best remedy. What's best for one person may not be best for another. Sure remedy for No, that's just as bad. No medicine is sure. Why not just put the facts? Well, the facts are so prosaic. H'm. What are the facts, anyway? Is it a good tonic? Well, I've never tried it myself. It seemed to help Florence when she was a bit run down. Customers have said they think it's a good tonic. But there might be other customers who think it a very poor one, but who haven't told me so. Whether it's good or not is really just a matter of opinion formed from personal experience with it. There's no absolute standard for good tonics. Well, what *can* I say? Plain, simple, straight-forward— absolute truth. *A* remedy for nervous disorders. Try it. I could put that. There you are, the unadorned fact. *A* remedy for nervous disorders. It *is* a remedy. No doubt about that. And just the suggestion to those who need a tonic, to try it. Nothing more. Nothing about toning up the system or making new blood or new tissues or new brain cells or any other blessed thing. Just a plain description of Moffatt's Tonic—what it is. Blow it all, I like that! The more I think of it the more I like it. There's something in it that's striking. The thing is, it's the truth—and nothing more. No attempt to garnish the truth. Just truth. There's a force behind it. It's a strong line. Just because it's true. In their way, those words have power. Far more power than talk about “absolute cure” or “the best” or “proved remedy.” I'll write a new card. Moffatt's Tonic. *A* remedy for nervous disorders. Try it. 2s. a bottle. This gives me a thrill. It's exciting to have expressed the whole full truth. I feel worked up about it. . . . The truth. . . . Well, well! Oh, there's the bell again. Somebody coming in. Ernest *must* fasten back those doors. . . .

He found at the counter a young man in shirt sleeves.

“Where d'you want me to put this here picture?” asked the young man.

“Oh, you've brought the picture from Mr. Dickson, the auctioneer, have you?”

IV. Head

Shortly after eleven o'clock, as he was vigorously shaking a bottle of mixture he had just dispensed and was at the same time hissing the refrain of “Down Among the Sheltering Palms,” Mr. Moffatt heard the hum of a

motor-car engine outside the shop. Then the sound stopped and there was the t-lock! of a motor-car door being banged. A few moments later he heard loud footfalls across the shop floor.

“You here, Moffatt?” called sharply a high-pitched, rather rasping male voice.

Mr. Moffatt's heart jumped, and he ceased to shake the bottle of mixture.

. . . Head! was the word in his mind. . . .

“Yes, Head—yes!” he exclaimed hurriedly; and almost at the same time the narrow door at the side of the dispensary partition was burst open, and there was the tall, spare form, the smart light tweed suit with a rosy-coloured silk handkerchief overflowing from the breast pocket of the coat, the bow tie, the smoking cigarette in a holder between the teeth, the small brown moustache, the bright eyes, and the brown felt hat—of Mr. Albert Head.

He strode enthusiastically into the dispensary.

“Hullo, Moffatt, old boy!” he greeted, put an arm across Mr. Moffatt's back and squeezed him affectionately with one hand clasping his shoulder.

Mr. Moffatt gasped on being squeezed, and was simultaneously embarrassed and fired with an energy that was foreign to his normal state.

“Here,” he retorted playfully, “you're squashing all the goodness out of me!”

“Ah, it'd take more than my squeezing to do that,” Mr. Head assured.

Mr. Moffatt felt very pleased with Mr. Head.

“You got my note this morning?” asked Mr. Head, releasing his hold on Mr. Moffatt.

“Oh, yes, I knew you were coming.”

“I've been nearly run off my legs,” Mr. Head declared, pushed his hat back off his forehead, and subsided into a chair in the middle of the dispensary floor. “We've been that busy, I haven't had time to get around. That's why I'm doing a few calls on Saturday mornings.” He took his cigarette in its holder from between his teeth and gesticulated with it gripped between two fingers. “D'you know, Moffatt, I've been all over Paddington, Woolahra, and Bondi this morning, and I want to get across to Standlick before I return to town.”

“You'll have to look lively, then,” remarked Mr. Moffatt, leaning against the dispensary bench with his hands thrust carelessly in his trousers pockets, an attitude he assumed only in the atmosphere created by Mr. Head's presence. His heart was beating hard.

“Yes, I haven't much time to spare,” agreed Mr. Head. He slid down more in the chair, crossed his legs, and pushed his thumbs into the armholes of his waist-coat. “D'you know, I heard a funny story the other

day about a little girl who'd recited at a mothers' meeting. The patron of the meeting made her way to the mother of the little girl, and congratulated her on the child's performance. 'How clever your little girl is, Mrs. Jones,' she said. And the proud mother replied, 'Yes, ma'am. Folks do say as she's good with her recitation. But as my husband says, all she wants to finish her off is a bit of electrocution.' "

Mr. Moffatt laughed heartily, his head thrown back.

. . . A bit of electrocution, he was thinking. Oh, that's very good. Electrocution. . . .

"But I mustn't stay too long, Moffatt," said Mr. Head, getting up from the chair. "What have you got for us this time?"

Mr. Moffatt withdrew his hands from his pockets, raised himself from the edge of the bench, and began to look through a small book labelled "Wanted," which hung by a string to a nail above the desk. "I don't think there's very much this time, Head," he answered, turning over the leaves. "Let me see, now. You might let me have some more white wrapping paper. You know the kind."

"White wrapping paper," repeated Mr. Head, as he pulled an order book from his pocket and turned over the pages until he found a blank one. "Six reams, eight reams, ten reams—?" he suggested, as he replaced his cigarette in his mouth, and produced a pencil from a pocket in his waistcoat.

"Two reams will be enough," said Mr. Moffatt.

"Better make it four, Moffatt," urged Mr. Head. "This kind of thing is bound to advance in price soon. Shortage of pulp, you know, in Newfoundland."

. . . Don't want to buy more at a time than I can help, Mr. Moffatt was reflecting. Don't want to seem mean or short-sighted, though. Don't want to lose money by not buying before the price goes up, either. I haven't heard of the pulp shortage in Newfoundland. Must have missed it. Oh I don't know, I don't know. . . .

"Well, perhaps——" he blushed as Mr. Head waited silently with pencil poised. "Let us say —er——"

"You'll save in the long run by ordering a good supply now," prophesied Mr. Head.

There was fierce conflict within Mr. Moffatt's mind.

"I think—er—three reams will be plenty," he announced at length, the colour rising in his cheeks.

. . . Suppose Head thinks I'm a terrible fool, were the words in his mind.

"You know, I don't use such a great deal of that paper," he hastened to add, as Mr. Head entered the desired quantity in his book.

Mr. Head shrugged his shoulders.

“Three reams it is,” he said as he wrote. “You know better than I do what you want.”

Mr. Moffatt felt relieved.

. . . After all, it's for me to order what I think best, he was reflecting. . . .

Mr. Head did not seem offended because of his rejected advice.

“Now the next!” he invited in his high-pitched tone.

“I don't think there *is* anything else,” said Mr. Moffatt.

. . . I ought to try to think of something else if I want him to tell me what I can do with this picture. Really can't think of anything, though. . . .

“How are you off for bill-heads—letter-heads —envelopes—labels—?”

“Afraid I'm well stocked.”

Mr. Head was not so sure. He walked to the back of the counter and pulled out the label drawer beneath the cash register.

“Eucalyptus oil,” he said, as he looked keenly at the array of labels.

“You're getting short of that. I'll put you down for five gross of eucalyptus oil, shall I?”

Mr. Moffatt had followed Mr. Head and looked with him over the labels.

“Oh, I think three gross will be enough this time, Head,” he answered.

Mr. Head shrugged his shoulders again.

“All right,” he said, as if he were being patient with difficulty. He entered the item in the book. “Three gross.”

. . . Wonder should I order more? Mr. Moffatt was thinking. Wonder do his other customers order bigger quantities? He must think I do a poor trade. . . .

“Perhaps you'd better make it *four* gross,” he amended, and ceased to feel so small and stingy.

“*Four* gross,” repeated Mr. Head, and Mr. Moffatt felt that better feeling was restored between them. He felt much happier.

“And four gross, shall we say, of essence of lemon?” suggested Mr. Head, touching the small pile of those labels with the end of his pencil.

Mr. Moffatt scratched his head. He did not want to subside into meanness again, but he really did not want four gross of essence of lemon labels.

“Oh, I think two gross will be plenty,” he said, hoping at the same time not to hurt Mr. Head's feelings.

“Just whatever you say,” agreed Mr. Head.

. . . I *really* can't do with more than two gross, his mind said. I use *very* few of them. . . .

“These Gregory powder labels are getting down,” informed Mr. Head, after he had rapidly noted the order. “But probably they'll do. I don't suppose you get through very many of *them*.”

Mr. Moffatt felt that Mr. Head was assuming a little too much authority on the subject.

“Well,” he said, “you might let me have, say, two gross more of Gregory powder.” He felt that this reversal of Mr. Head's opinion of his requirements of Gregory powder labels restored him to his place of authority over his own label drawer. Having taken the initiative regarding Gregory powder labels, he went further.

“I think the rest will do,” he declared, as if to terminate the matter.

“Two gross, Gregory powder,” repeated Mr. Head, writing. “Now, what else besides labels?”

“Nothing that I know of,” said Mr. Moffatt.

. . . Suppose he wants to get away as soon as he can, he reasoned. Must get him inside. About that picture. . . .

“All *right*,” agreed Mr. Head. “So much for *that*.”

He shut the label drawer, replaced his orderbook in his inside coat pocket, and patted Mr. Moffatt on the back. They walked into the dispensary again.

“I suppose you can spare five minutes from the shop——” Mr. Head was beginning.

“I want you to have something with me this time,” Mr. Moffatt interposed. He winked as he added roguishly: “I've got some very nice sherry inside.”

“Oh? Something special?”

“You'd better taste it,” Mr. Moffatt answered non-committally.

“It's a long time since I tasted any *really* good sherry,” said Mr. Head.

. . . Now I suppose I've led him to expect something out of the ordinary in sherry, reflected Mr. Moffatt. . . .

“Call out to me if anyone comes in, Ernest,” he said to the boy, who was rinsing bottles in the sink. “I'll just be inside.”

The boy went on rinsing.

“I'll leave my hat here, Moffatt,” announced Mr. Head, and dropped the article on the chair.

“Certainly,” said Mr. Moffatt. He opened the door leading to the residence.

“You know,” said Mr. Head, as he followed Mr. Moffatt through the doorway, “I heard a funny story the other day about two business men who were talking about holidays, and one said, ‘You give your staff a fortnight's holiday every year, don't you?’ ‘I give them a month,’ answered the other. ‘A month!’ the first man exclaimed. ‘Yes,’ said the other man, ‘the two weeks when they're away, and the two weeks when I'm away!’ ‘I give them a month,’ answered the other. ‘A month!’ the first man exclaimed. ‘Yes,’

said the other man, ‘the two weeks when they're away, and the two weeks when I'm away!’ ”

Mr. Moffatt was laughing heartily as they reached the sitting room. “Oh, that's very good!” he commended.

. . . Wish I could think of a good one to tell in return, he was thinking. Head must think I'm very dull not to be able to. . . . I forget the blessed things. What was that one about the Irishman and the Scotchman? The Irishman said to the Scotchman—oh, I forget it. . . .

“Very cool in here, isn't it, Moffatt?” remarked Mr. Head, as he looked out through the lace-curtained windows on to the street outside, in which a tram-car was coming to a standstill.

“Yes, it's the best room in the house during the summer,” informed Mr. Moffatt, and looked round at the fireplace, the big sideboard, the round table in the centre of the room on which stood a silver vase full of pink roses, the brown sofa, the easy chairs, and behind the sofa, resting on the floor, the big picture in its wide gilt frame.

He brought a decanter of sherry from the top of the sideboard, and two wine-glasses from the cupboard underneath.

“Sit down and make yourself comfortable, old man,” he suggested, generously, as he put the drinking essentials on the table.

“Thanks,” responded Mr. Head. He turned round, lowered himself into an easy chair by the fireplace, and crossed his legs. He began very softly to whistle a scrap from *La Boheme*.

Mr. Moffatt filled the glasses, and handed one to Mr. Head. Mr. Head stopped whistling, and became very serious.

“Thanks, Moffatt,” he said.

Mr. Moffatt took the other glass of sherry, and sat on a chair opposite to Mr. Head. There was a profound silence until he had sat down. Then Mr. Head solemnly raised his glass. Mr. Moffatt did the same.

“Well, here's to your jolly good health, Moffatt!” Mr. Head toasted. He spoke very quietly.

“To *your* jolly good health!” Mr. Moffatt returned the compliment.

There was another profound silence as the two heads were upraised to imbibe the beverage.

. . . Mustn't forget that Mrs. Ingleburn is going to call back for her prescription in ten minutes or so, was the thought in Mr. Moffatt's mind, as his eyes observed the ceiling. I haven't put the label on it yet. Won't take a moment to do that, of course. And she might not call when she said she would. To me, this seems excellent sherry. But I'm not a connoisseur. Hope Head likes it. Wonder what he thinks. . . .

The glasses were being lowered. Mr. Head was contemplating the taste

lingering on his palate.

“Yes, very good stuff,” he decided, as he held up the glass again and scrutinised in the light a portion of the wine remaining in it.

. . . Is he just saying that out of politeness? Mr. Moffatt was thinking. . . .

“Glad you like it,” he said.

Mr. Head drank what was left in his glass.

“Yes, very nice, Moffatt,” he declared.

“Help yourself,” Mr. Moffatt suggested; and reflected:

. . . Wonder does he *really* think it good sherry? . . .

Mr. Moffatt felt generous-hearted for having offered the entire contents of the decanter to Mr. Head. As Mr. Head was refilling his glass, Mr. Moffatt was debating:

. . . I don't think *I'll* have another glass. The blessed stuff goes to my head. Oh, I don't know. I think I *will* have another one. Head will think I'm very conservative having only one glass. Of course, it doesn't follow that I should have another just because Head does. No, I think I'll be very slow in finishing what I have. I don't know, I feel bucked up by what I've drunk. I think I *will* have another glass. Just two glasses won't hurt me. I'll drink off what I have here, and have just one more. . . .

“You don't like to have more than one glass, do you, Moffatt?” asked Mr. Head, as he puffed at his cigarette before beginning to drink again.

“Er—no,” answered Mr. Moffatt. “I don't usually.”

. . . No, I *won't* have another. I'm just as well with only one. Speak about the picture. Head wants to get to Standlick before lunch. What would you do with a great hulking picture like that, Head? Or something about that you don't think he's seen this picture before. Go on. . . .

“Did you ever see this big picture I've got here, Head?” he asked, as Mr. Head lowered his glass after drinking some more sherry.

Mr. Head hastily swallowed a mouthful he had been dallying over, and turned to look where Mr. Moffatt pointed.

“No, Moffatt,” he replied, getting up from his chair and with his cigarette between his teeth and his wine glass in one hand, walking to the sofa. “I never knew you had this.”

Mr. Moffatt raised himself.

“Where did you pick it up?” asked Mr. Head. “What is it all about?”

Mr. Moffatt swallowed the sherry that remained in his glass, set the glass on the table and walked to the head of the sofa.

“Wait a moment,” he said. “I'll show you.”

He pulled away the sofa, and there was the big picture exposed fully to view, its five feet of height and its six feet of length; its group of richly garbed men and women to the right, in the shadow of a dark background of

trees, some of the faces expressing derision, some laughter, some cynicism; its rustic gateway in the middle, on either side of which a nude female figure with wings, holding a flaming sword; the naked man walking through the gate towards the lighted open space on the other side of the gate, at the end of which the simply architected temple surmounted by a tiny star.

“Where did you come across this, Moffatt?” Mr. Head asked again, as he looked closely at the painting, then stood away from it.

“I've had it for a long time,” answered Mr. Moffatt. He was pleased that Mr. Head should at once be interested. “A man borrowed twenty pounds from me about ten years ago, and gave it to me as security. I've had it up in the attic. But I never heard from the blighter again, so I think I'm justified in selling the thing to get back my twenty pounds.”

“Twenty pounds? Is that all you want?” asked Mr. Head, coming close to the picture again.

“If I could get my twenty pounds returned to me, I'd be very pleased. I had no idea the old chap would treat me like this.”

“But, blow it all, my dear Moffatt! Twenty pounds! It's a beautiful piece of work!”

“Yes, I like it all right,” assented Mr. Moffatt; “but it's no use to me. We haven't space to hang it properly. Florence doesn't like it because it would make any room look so small.”

“Do you say this man handed it to you as security for twenty pounds? Did he say anything about it?”

“I really don't remember much. He had the picture delivered to me, and he convinced me that I would easily get fifty pounds for it if he couldn't repay me. He told me who the artist was, but I forget the name now. It was nobody well known, anyhow! If I could get twenty pounds I'd be very satisfied.”

“Do you mean to say you can't?”

“Well, I sent it to an auctioneer at Bagley Junction with a reserve of twenty pounds on it; but the best offer he could get was twelve pounds ten. And of course there would have been commission off that. I suppose I was wrong to send it to a local auctioneer. People who'd attend a sale at Bagley Junction are not likely to own houses big enough to accommodate a picture like this. What would *you* do with it, Head?”

“Do?” repeated Mr. Head, and put his wine glass on the table beside Mr. Moffatt's. “My dear Moffatt,” he said, biting his lips and looking intently at the picture, “I don't know what to tell you.”

. . . Bother the blessed picture! Mr. Moffatt was thinking. Suppose nobody wants to buy it. Never knew I'd have all this trouble. . . .

Mr. Head was silently regarding the picture for a while. Then he said:

“You know, Moffatt, this painting is in many ways—just superb. It's exquisite. Stand over here with me.”

Mr. Moffatt moved to the place indicated.

“Look at that effect of light on the left,” Mr. Head pointed out.

. . . Yes, strong sunshine, reflected Mr. Moffatt. Very bright. Contrast to the shadows under the trees. . . .

“Very good, isn't it?” he agreed.

“Do you see?” said Mr. Head, enthusiastic. “The way that's been painted is simply wonderful. Few artists can achieve just that effect. The way it softly illumines the building and the fringes of the trees, and the naked man.”

. . . Yes, it's very good, Mr. Moffatt was thinking. Now I come to look at it more intently, it's very beautiful. Though it doesn't stagger me. I didn't know it was so hard to get that effect in painting. But I'm no artist. . . .

“And just look, Moffatt, at these colours—the richness of them—the contrast of these beautiful blues in the clothing of the people here on the right with the golden light on the other side of the gate. There's magic in this picture, Moffatt. It's no mean artist who's painted it.”

. . . Wish I could remember his name, Mr. Moffatt cogitated. The man told me right enough, but I never thought so *much* about it. . . .

“And look at the forms of these figures with the wings and flaming swords at either side of the gate,” continued Mr. Head, pointing with his cigarette. “Angels, I suppose they are.”

“I was never too sure what they were supposed to be. I always thought angels wore clothes,” said Mr. Moffatt.

“Why shouldn't they be angels?” demanded Mr. Head. “Did you ever *see* an angel that wore clothes?”

Mr. Moffatt laughed.

“Well, anyhow,” he said, smiling and shaking his head, “I'm sure I don't know what it all means.”

“Oh, I expect it's symbolical,” opined Mr. Head.

“Yes, Florence thinks it's symbolical of something. She doesn't know what.”

“But there's a glamour about this picture, Moffatt. I can't help saying it. That beautiful effect of light, and those colours, and the grace of the forms and—look at the faces on those people, too. If I could afford it, I'd buy this from you.”

“Well, I'd be glad to sell you it.”

“Ah, but I wouldn't pay *your* price.”

“You don't think it's worth twenty pounds?”

"I think that for all you know it might be worth twenty *thousand* pounds!"

Mr. Head nodded towards Mr. Moffatt in emphasis as he spoke.

Mr. Moffatt's heart leapt. He looked at Mr. Head.

. . . If this is a joke, he was thinking, it's not the kind of joke I appreciate.

. . .

"You don't really think it might be valuable, do you?" he asked.

"Well," said Mr. Head, slowly, looking intently at the picture again, "I'm not an expert, But I've seen enough painting to know that whoever made that picture was a first-rate artist. It *might* be by one of the old masters. I wouldn't like to say."

"Do you really mean to say that it might be worth a lot of money?" demanded Mr. Moffatt, impatient to get to the point.

"It certainly strikes me as good enough to be looked at by an expert. If it's a genuine old master, there's almost no end to what you might get for it in the right market."

. . . Thousands of pounds! Mr. Moffatt was thinking. Could retire. Pay off this damned mortgage. Tour the world. Motor-car. *Oh* no. Too good to be true. . . .

He shook his head and smiled.

"I don't think these things come my way, Head," he said, sceptically. "*I* never win sweeps or lotteries, or have masterpieces handed to me for twenty pound loans!"

"Well, I don't want to raise false hopes in you," declared Mr. Head. "But I do say that you ought to have an expert to look at this picture. I should say it was a Dutch work, seventeenth century, perhaps."

"What makes you think that?"

"The way those people are dressed. If it happened to be a genuine Vermeer, Moffatt, you'd be a made man."

. . . Vermeer? Mr. Moffatt reflected. Never heard of Vermeer. Dutch painter, I suppose. Suppose I *ought* to have heard of him, if his work is so valuable. Vermeer. Go on, ask Head. Might be common for people to be ignorant of Vermeer. . . .

"Vermeer, did you say?" he inquired, as if he hadn't heard correctly.

"Yes. You know, the Dutch painter. Only a small portion of his work has come to light since he died. If this were a real Vermeer, it might fetch as much as between ten and fifteen thousand pounds. His pictures are so scarce. And everybody wants them."

"May it, then, be a Vermeer!" exclaimed Mr. Moffatt fervently.

. . . Not my luck, he was thinking. No, it's not a Vermeer. No use imagining it is. I'll be very pleased if I recover my twenty pounds. . . .

“What do you think I ought to do about it?” he asked, while Mr. Head was lighting another cigarette.

“If I were you,” advised Mr. Head, as he shook the match with which he had lit his cigarette, extinguished the flame, and threw the stick into the fireplace, “if I were you, I'd get somebody from the Art Gallery to examine it.”

“I don't know anybody there.”

“I tell you what, I'll have a talk over the telephone to Sir Wilbur Canes. I know him well. If I tell him this picture might be an old Dutch masterpiece, he'll be out to look at it in no time. He's tremendously keen on examining old pictures.”

“Well, that would be very kind of you, I'm sure,” said Mr. Moffatt.

. . . Oh bother it, I'm not excited, he was thinking. Oh, it's no masterpiece. Don't worry. No, no, no. Oh yes, you hear of pictures worth a fortune being found in out-of-the-way places; but oh no, no, no. Oh, I'm afraid I've no such luck. Oh, absurd. Oh, nonsense. Sell the business—be free of all my debts—tour round the world—expensive hotels—no, no, no—no, no, no! . . .

“Have some more sherry, Head, old fellow?” he invited. “I think I'll have some myself. My mouth feels quite dry.”

“Thanks, Moffatt,” responded Mr. Head. “I think I will.” He smiled at Mr. Moffatt. “You're getting excited,” he declared. “You *may* be disappointed.”

“Excited!” exclaimed Mr. Moffatt, as he filled the glasses again. “I'm too old to get excited.”

They drank.

. . . What a fool Head is, Mr. Moffatt reflected as he drained his glass. Talking about being excited. I'm not excited. There's nothing to be excited about. Nothing's happened. The picture isn't worth a fortune unless it's proved to be by a master. Of course it's not. Oh, money doesn't come so easily. . . .

“If you like, Moffatt,” said Mr. Head, as he put down his glass, “I'll telephone Sir Wilbur Canes now.”

“There's no hurry,” said Mr. Moffatt, dabbing his lips and his drooping moustache with his handkerchief. “But if you'd like to, all right.”

. . . Oh, it won't come to anything, his thoughts were going on. I know it won't. I'm in no hurry to hear about it. Oh, I'm not, I'm *not*. *Any* time will do. Oh, I know what the verdict will be. . . .

They walked back to the dispensary.

“You know the story about the man who made a fortune out of selling hare-pies?” asked Mr. Head, as they crossed the passage.

. . . I'm not in a mood for funny stories, reflected Mr. Moffatt. . . .

"No, I haven't heard that one," he answered, and placed his hand on the dispensary door knob.

"Somebody was asking him how he had made such a lot of money out of hare-pies," Mr. Head went on. "He admitted that he *had* put something else with the hare, a little horse flesh. 'What proportions did you use?' he was asked. 'Oh,' he said, 'fifty-fifty, you know—one horse, one hare!'"

. . . One horse, one hare, reflected Mr. Moffatt. Oh, I see, I see. One horse, one hare. . . .

He was laughing as they walked into the dispensary again.

Mr. Head took up the telephone directory. Then there was the sound of many feet in the shop, and a medley of childish cries of, "Shop! Shop! Mr. Moffatt! Shop!"

. . . Little beggars, thought Mr. Moffatt, as he walked round to the counter. Making all this noise. . . .

"Here, not so much row!" he exclaimed, as he came face to face with five eager children rapping on the counter with their knuckles.

"Got any empty boxes, Mr. Moffatt?" they cried, almost in unison. "Any boxes? Any boxes? Aw, give one to me! Ah no, to me, Mr. Moffatt—to me! Oh Mr. Moffatt! Oh no, not to her! She had one the last time. Give it to me! Give it to me!"

V. His Self-Control

It was almost a quarter past nine that evening, after he had closed the shop, that he came into the sitting room and sat down with a sigh in his armchair by the empty fireplace. Mrs. Moffatt was seated opposite, darning socks and stockings. He stretched his legs out.

"Phew!" he exclaimed.

"Tired, are you?" asked Mrs. Moffatt. "Put on your slippers."

"Yes, had a lot to do to-day," he said, his eyes directed to the ceiling. "About played out."

. . . Glad to sit down, he was thinking. Chemists' hours are far too long. It's simply slavery. Eight in the morning till nine at night, at it all the time. Can't always get your meals in peace. . . .

"I do wish," observed Mrs. Moffatt, pausing in her work, "that something would be done to bring about early closing for chemists. I'm sure the long hours are too much for you, dear."

Mr. Moffatt sighed.

"Oh, they're not too long," he said. "I'm not so tired. Just glad to sit down, that's all."

“Let me put your slippers on for you,” she volunteered.

“No, don't worry. I'll put them on myself. You go on with your work. I'm all right.”

“I've put your pipe and tobacco on the table, dear,” she said, resuming her gestures with needle and wool.

“Thanks,” acknowledged Mr. Moffatt.

. . . Oh just leave me alone, he was reflecting. Till I'm rested. Don't talk. Just be quiet. You know she's trying to make you comfortable, and you're merely being irritable. Yes, I know. And you know you'd like to have your slippers on instead of those hot, cramping shoes. Yes, but don't ask me would I *like* to have them put on. Just put them on. Don't talk to me. . . .

He closed his eyes.

In his mind he was leaning back against the cushioned seats of a luxurious motor-car. Florence sat beside him. Naomi was in front with the chauffeur. The car was speeding along, and there was beautiful scenery on either side, to which he was somewhat indifferent. “Do you want to go on to Monte Carlo for the night?” he was asking Florence, as they swayed about. Florence was answering, “I don't know. What do you think, Naomi?” Naomi was turning round in her seat to remark, “Oh, let's stay the night in Cannes. Or, no, let us go on to Nice. Tomorrow we can stop at Monte Carlo.” “Just whatever you like, dear,” he was saying opulently, shrugging his shoulders. “It's all the same to me.” He was telling the chauffeur, and the chauffeur was nodding and saying, “Very good, sir!” . . . Then he was standing in the moonlight on the deck of a big steamer. He was clad in a dinner suit, had just come up from dinner, and was smoking a cigar. “Yes,” he was remarking casually to another man in a dinner suit, “we're leaving the boat to-morrow at Bombay. Oh, just about six weeks we'll be in India, then we're going on to China and Japan. Oh, yes, it's very pleasant travelling round. I'd just as soon be back in Sydney, though. It's really for the sake of my wife and daughter that I'm going round the world. Oh, yes, yes! Oh, yes, yes! Did you? Yes, yes— oh, yes! Oh, yes, yes! Ha, ha, ha! Oh, very funny! I don't know, I'm sure. We're thinking of living for a while in California. My wife likes the climate, you know. Yes, yes! Oh, yes! Ah, yes, that's very true! Oh, yes, yes!” . . .

He opened his eyes again.

He looked across at the sofa and at the broad, filigreed gilt frame and the upper part of the picture rearing up behind the sofa back. His heart beat faster as he discerned the tops of the trees in the picture and the beautiful light effect.

. . . Say fifteen thousand pounds, his thoughts ran on. At five per cent. interest that would be— let me see. Five per cent.—that's a shilling in the

pound. Fifteen thousand shillings. Divide by twenty. Cross off the noughts. That's like two into one five nought nought. Two into fifteen— seven and one over, two into ten—five—and the nought. Seven hundred and fifty pounds a year! That's—let me see—that's fifteen pounds a week. At five per cent. Invested at ten per cent. it would be thirty pounds a week. Oh, nonsense, nonsense. But that just gives you an idea of what it *would* mean.

. . .

He drew a deep breath, sat up straighter in his chair, reached out and took his pipe and tobacco pouch, and began to rub tobacco between his palms and to fill the bowl of his pipe. Then he lit his pipe, puffed at it, and began to feel contented. He reached down and began to unlace his shoes.

“Hiss, iss, iss, iss, iss, Hiss, iss,” he began; and in his thoughts there followed the words:

. . . I want to go to bye-byes, to rest my weary head, bang-bang. Tra-ra-ra ter-a-ra, ter-a-ra-ra-ra, ter-a-ra, ter-a-ra, ter-a-a-a- . . .

“Naomi go off to her meeting to-night all right?” he asked. He felt he wanted to make amends for his irritability towards Mrs. Moffatt.

“Yes, she had her early tea,” answered Mrs. Moffatt, continuing to darn. “She really took only a bite. Then she was gone again.”

He felt that his good relations with Mrs. Moffatt were restored. He was happier. As he was pulling off his shoes and drawing his socks looser about his feet, his mind was proceeding:

. . . You *must* tell Florence all about the picture. She'll be here when Sir Wilbur Canes comes tomorrow, and if he says he thinks the painting is an old master, she'll be far more excited and upset than if you prepared her now. Yes, but so far absolutely nothing has happened. It's only what might be. As far as I know at this moment the picture is only an ordinary picture entrusted to me as security for a loan of twenty pounds. Head has said things about it, but that may mean nothing. But it may mean something. Oh, no, no. I can't believe it. I've told her the truth. She asked me at dinner time what Head had thought about the picture, and I told her he'd asked a friend of his to see it. That's perfectly true. But it's not all the truth. Yes, but if I told her Head remarked that the picture might be worth ten or twenty thousand pounds, she'd begin to imagine all kinds of things, and be very disappointed if this man Canes thinks it valueless. . . .

He drew on his slippers, then got up and took a book from the top of the book-case and sat down again. He opened the book at about the page where he remembered he had left off reading the night before.

. . . Failure and regression of the libido. The failure of the libido to carry a conation into action is sometimes due to the inherent weakness of the psychic energy of the individual. Oh, I think I read that. When the libido

fails to complete a conation—yes, I did. Conflict. In many cases a major conflict may take place between differentiated and segregated complexes. Yes, I was past that. Let me see, now. Psychical segregation and displacement. By-ways of the libido. Yes, this is where I was. It was shown in Chapter III that hand in hand with the gradual evolution, the increase in complexity, of mind, there goes a building up or integration of simple conations into more and more complex ones. Progressive integration is, as we saw, the key process in the evolution of animal and human behaviour. It is the process which has enabled the bee swarm and the wolf pack to become such efficient mechanisms as they are because of the subordination of individual to herd conations. It is the process which has enabled man to acquire his vast and complex control over the external world. Could let Florence have her own cheque-book then, for the house-keeping accounts. “Just spend whatever you think is necessary. Oh, it's not generosity: I just want to keep you from bothering me.” “You old dear, John, you're always teasing.” We have now become familiar with many examples of the reverse process, disintegration, the breaking up of mental processes or of mental structure into constituent parts. “Will you be using the car this morning, father?” “Later on I'll want it. But I'll tell you what, James can run you into town, then you can send him back here. I just want him to run me over to the bowling club. Then you can have the car as much as you like for the whole afternoon. You could call for me on your way home, if you'd like to.” “You're such a dear, father!” “Now none of these blandishments.” “I'll tell James to send the car round for me at once.” “All right, dear.” The first example we had occasion to notice was the separation of affect from the original conation. “Yes, we'll be able to go into our new house next month. Oh, yes, they've been fairly quick. Yes, it *is* in a beautiful situation. Yes, Naomi practically designed the whole of it. She's a clever girl. All right, I'll have just one game of bowls, but then I must leave. I have the car calling for me at five. Yes, we're having dinner in town, and going to some show or other afterwards. Oh, the wife likes me to go, you know.” With which it is associated, and the making of this affect the end of the new conation, which is a truncated form of the original one. “Oh yes! We're motoring through Paris, then down to the Riviera, across to Venice, then to Rome and Naples. We're catching the boat there to Egypt. We'll be in Egypt a few weeks, then we're taking the boat again for India. Then on to China and Japan before we return home to Australia. Oh, yes, we came to England by way of the United States. Oh, yes, we'll have been right round the world when we get back.” “My word, you're a lucky man, Mr. Moffatt!” “Ah well, I've worked very hard in my time, you know.” These consequences only ensue if the complex cut off is endowed with

psychic energy. Say that it did fetch fifteen thousand. Oh, nonsense. But just say that it did. I think I'd feel inclined to spend five thousand on a house and travelling round a bit, and invest the remaining ten thousand. Ten thousand. Ten thousand pounds. The outlawed complex, still *in* the mind, but no longer *of* it, acts like a bandit or pariah in the mental society. Invested shrewdly, it ought to return ten per cent. That would be an income of a thousand a year. Twenty pounds a week. Two shillings in the pound. Twenty thousand shillings. Divide by twenty. That's right—a thousand a year. And I'd have the other five thousand to spend apart from that. Or to vary the metaphor, it becomes a parasite, constantly tapping the fresh energy produced in the mind—oh, I can't get interested in this damned book. I don't know a word I've read. . . .

“Do you know what Head told me to-day about the picture?” he burst out, suddenly.

“Something you haven't told me?” asked Mrs. Moffatt, looking up from her darning operations.

“Well, it's just something he happened to remark.”

“What did he say?”

“Ha, ha, ha!” Mr. Moffatt put his book on the table, took his pipe from his mouth, and wiped his lips and his moustache with the back of his hand.

“Tell me, what did he say?” questioned Mrs. Moffatt. She stopped darning altogether.

“I don't want to raise your hopes and then have them dashed to pieces, darling; but he said that that picture might be an old master!”

“*Never!*”

“Well, he thought it was a beautiful piece of work.”

“And of course so it is.”

“He thought it might even turn out to be a genuine—er—Vermeer.”

“Vermeer?”

“You know, dear, the seventeenth-century Dutch painter. You remember him, of course.”

“Yes, of course. His work is extremely valuable. A Vermeer? I should think so!”

“He told me that if it proved to be a genuine Ver—er—Vermeer, it might fetch anything between ten and twenty thousand!”

“Tch, tch! Between ten and twenty thousand!”

“I don't want you to get excited about it, Florence. I'm just telling you what Head told me. There might be simply nothing in it at all.”

“Oh, no,” agreed Mrs. Moffatt, “I wouldn't get worked up about just what Mr. Head thought. It can be a very beautiful picture without being a Vermeer. I can hardly believe, dear, that it is really a valuable picture. I

don't think that man would have left it with you so long if it had been worth much."

. . . Wet blanket you are, Florence, Mr. Moffatt was thinking, impatiently. . . .

"And ten thousand," she continued—"that's not such a great sum of money, is it?"

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed. "I'd retire on less than that!"

"*Would* you, dear?"

"And there's no reason in the whole wide world why that picture that we've had stowed away in the attic for ten years shouldn't turn out to be worth even *thirty* thousand pounds! The thing's happened before. People have pictures, and they don't know the *value* of them. I wouldn't be the slightest bit surprised if this Sir Wilbur Canes comes to-morrow and declares it's a genuine masterpiece. There, now!"

"I hardly think so, dear."

"Well, of course, we can only wait until Sir Wilbur Canes sees it. He's from the Art Gallery, so he ought to know something."

Mrs. Moffatt went on with her darning.

Mr. Moffatt took up his book again. He sighed as he found his place.

. . . The tendency not to follow a conation to its proper end and to set up some other end short of—What's this? The—tendency—not—to—follow—a—conation—to—its—proper—end, —and—to—set—up—Oh, I never did say that I really thought it was valuable. I've maintained all along that it's most unlikely to be a genuine master. There'll be a lot of fuss, then in the end I'll have to send it to another auction sale, accept fifteen pounds for it, and think myself very lucky. The tendency not to follow a conation to its proper end . . . She doesn't seem to *realise* what it would mean. She doesn't seem to grasp it. Can't she imagine the difference it would make to us? . . .

"Don't you realise, Florence," he asked, "that with fifteen thousand, not to speak of twenty thousand, we could travel round the world, then invest what remained and live in comparative luxury—build our own house, have our own motor-car——"

Mrs. Moffatt dropped her hands into her lap and laughed. Then she shook her head as she looked wistfully into the empty fireplace.

"Oh, John!" she exclaimed. "I can't for a *moment* picture us becoming suddenly rich. It's no use trying."

Mr. Moffatt put his book back on the table and laughed too.

"It *would* be a surprise, wouldn't it?" he said.

"Good gracious, yes!"

He chuckled, struck another match, and applied it to the tobacco in his

pipe. As he sucked smoke in and puffed smoke out, his heart was beating abnormally and his thoughts were running on:

. . . “Well, if you were to ask me who was the most popular man on the ship, I'd say—Mr. Moffatt. Easily. He's popular with everybody. All the passengers like him. He's so bright and so lively. He makes everybody feel happy.” “Hallo, captain! I've just won another game of deck quoits!” “Have you really? You're positively marvellous, Mr. Moffatt!” “Ha, ha, ha! Yes—yes! Oh, he gave me a pretty hard go, but I beat him, by jove! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!” “Ha, ha, ha!” “Yes, I don't know what we'd do without Mr. Moffatt.” Oh, nonsense. . . .

He blew his nose, cleared his throat, and took up his book again.

. . . Many such changes of end are legitimate enough, as we have seen, and may be set alongside the construction of artificial conations which at least partially satisfy primitive instincts, for the satisfaction of which on the original lines there is no room in the conditions of civilised life. Hunting, shooting, and fishing for sport, many kinds of games which satisfy the combative instinct, and many “hobbies,” such as those which spring from the “collective instinct,” are all examples of this kind of activity. In these cases the conation is carried to an . . . oh, I don't seem able to read tonight at all. . . .

He put the book on his lap, his finger in the place where he had been reading. He crossed his legs and settled deeper into his chair. Puffing at his pipe, he looked across at the top of the picture.

. . . Really beautiful, that light effect, he thought. . . .

Then his eyes roamed back to the mantelpiece, where the clock was going tick-tuck-tick-tuck-tick-tuck! Its hands pointed to ten minutes to ten. Then he looked at Mrs. Moffatt, who was pushing her hand into the foot of a sock, and looking all over the material to see if any places needed mending.

. . . Darning my socks, he was thinking. How pretty she looks, just with her head bent over like that. She's all unconscious that she's looking pretty. She's so sensible, too. I would have thought she'd have been very much worked up about the picture. But she was just calm—and sensible. Now, if it had been Naomi, I wouldn't have been surprised. She's so matter-of-fact. I think it would take a tremendous lot to excite Naomi. What a wonderful woman Florence is! She manages everything so well. She was a perfect mother to Cyril and Naomi. She's so efficient in the house. Nothing very serious ever seems to go wrong. I don't think much about these things, but how lucky I am to have this wonderful woman to care for me! She's looking after me all the time in a hundred different ways. What an extraordinary thing that she should be satisfied with me—satisfied to live

with me, actually to see so much in me that she can love me! Tch, tch! I don't know, I don't know. I believe, somehow, that God has made every one of us, and I thank God for putting a dear woman like Florence into the world. Dear Florence! I love her name. I love everything about her. I feel I want now to go and put my arms round her and kiss her— she is so good to me and so beautiful and so loving, and I love her so much. I feel I want to hug her as tight as ever I can and kiss her and kiss her. Dear, dear Florence! I don't know. Why don't I go to her and hug and kiss her? Well, why don't you? Go on, why don't you? I feel I could squeeze her until I squeezed her right inside me. Well, go on. Get up and go to her and put your arms round her. I feel I want to swallow her up inside me. I love you, Florence. I love you, I love you. Go on, go now and kiss her. I don't know—she's busy with her darning. That doesn't matter. She won't mind. Oh, she'll wonder what on earth's the matter with me. It's so unusual. I never kiss her except in bed, or when she's going out somewhere at night, or when she goes to bed alone and leaves me down here reading. But it isn't an extraordinary thing that you feel a love for Florence. It's the most natural thing in the world. At this very moment she might be feeling the same love towards you, and yet wondering whether you'd think her silly if she came and kissed you. Perhaps. She might be. Go on, then, just get up quietly and naturally, and put your arms round her and kiss her. Oh, I don't know, I can't. She's got the sock in one hand and the darning needle in the other. She'd feel so awkward trying to put her arms round me. She'd be fumbling to put down the sock and the needle, and then—oh, it would all be so clumsy. Then she'd be wishing I'd choose a more suitable time to kiss her, and she wouldn't like to say so actually, but she'd be really just putting up with me and my queer ways. Go on. No, I can't. Go on. No, I don't want to now. Go on. No, I'm not going to do it now. No—no. . . .

His heart was beating very hard. He picked up his book again, and twitched it open at the place where he had been holding his finger.

. . . It involves external action, and is a natural term intimately bound up with physiologically conditioned increase and culmination of effect. Go on! Go on! It cannot be considered a purely affective end, though the intensity of affect is so great that the pursuit of this end is frequently reckoned as the pursuit of pleasure. Go on! Go on! No, I'm not going to. No, I've decided not to. Any of these may be taken as ends when the complete process is truncated. Otherwise they appear as preparatory stages. . . . Knock at the door. . . .

“Oh, I expect that will be Naomi,” said Mrs. Moffatt, looking up at the clock.

“Yes—oh, yes!” exclaimed Mr. Moffatt hurriedly. “I'll let her in.”

He got up.

. . . Go on! Bend over and kiss her as you go out of the room. No, I can't. Too late now. . . .

“She's home early,” Mrs. Moffatt remarked, as he walked into the hall to the front door. “What will *she* say about the picture?”

Chapter Two

I. Sunday Morning

On Sunday mornings in the summer time, he rose at half past six, ate a biscuit, drank a glass of water, walked nearly a mile to the sea beach, and bathed in the surf. By half past eight he had bathed, walked back home, and was eagerly breakfasting. At nine o'clock he opened the shop for an hour, and at ten o'clock it was shut until half past six in the evening.

It was a little before ten o'clock in the morning that he was standing behind his glass counter, his hands resting on the edge, watching the exit of a young man who had bought a bottle of cocoanut oil.

The door between the residence and the dispensary opened, and Mrs. Moffatt appeared.

“Sir Wilbur Canes has just come,” she said in a loud whisper.

“Oh! Oh—has he? Oh!”

Mr. Moffatt looked at his watch as he walked into the dispensary.

“I'll close the shop—now,” he announced in a subdued tone. “It's *almost* ten o'clock.”

He spoke as though it was a great conspiracy between himself and Mrs. Moffatt to have the shop closed a few minutes before the usual time.

“Yes, all right, dear,” said Mrs. Moffatt awesomely. “I'll tell him you'll be in in a couple of minutes.”

His heart was throbbing as he walked round the counter, and across the shop floor to the street entrance. He picked up the dusty door mat, flung it across the floor, swung shut the double main doors, pushed up a bolt at the top, trod down a bolt at the bottom, jammed across a sliding bolt in the lock, and fastened it there with a wrench of the big key. It was a banging, clanging, squeaking business. He exhaled sharply a lungful of air when it was done.

. . . Sir Wilbur Canes, he was thinking. Sir Wilbur Canes. Sir Wilbur Canes. “Oh, how do you do, Sir Wilbur!” “Sir Wilbur Canes? Yes, yes, I am Mr. Moffatt. Oh, yes. Yes, Mr. Head spoke about you, of course. I'm very, *very* grateful to you for coming.” I never expected him so early. Ten o'clock. He said he'd be here before lunch. I thought that would mean some time between eleven and twelve. “Yes, that's a Vermeer. It doesn't admit of any argument. That picture is by Vermeer. On behalf of the Sydney Art Gallery, Mr. Moffatt, I'll make you an offer of twenty thousand pounds. You might get more from some other part of the world, but from the point of view of patriotism——” “Oh, yes, yes, Mr. Head has often spoken about

you, Mr. Moffatt. He thinks very highly of you.” I wonder would he care for a glass of whisky—or sherry? “Oh, good morning, Sir Wilbur!” “Oh, yes, yes! Do you really? Oh, yes, yes. Yes, I suppose so. Ha, ha, ha! Ah yes, that is indeed very true.” “No, I’d prefer to let Sydney have the picture, Sir Wilbur. I’ll accept your offer.” “Remember, in America, for instance, you might get far more, and——” “No, it’s not the money so much, Sir Wilbur.” “You don’t mind if I communicate the discovery of this great picture to the newspapers, do you?” “Well, if you want something published, Sir Wilbur, I’ll not raise any objection. Of course, I don’t want my name mentioned. I’m not seeking publicity.” “Oh, that won’t do, Mr. Moffatt. You must give your photograph to the papers. I expect reporters will be sent to interview you, too. Indeed, I have no doubt that the news of this great discovery will be cabled all over the world.” Oh, don’t be silly. . .

He was walking across the shop floor back to the dispensary. The shop seemed strangely dark and spectral with the doors closed. He felt eerie himself. His hands were trembling as he straightened his tie while passing the mirror in the dispensary partition. He was pleased with the figure in the glass. He was wearing his best suit of clothes, the trousers were well pressed, and his shoes were highly polished, for he usually attended the eleven o’clock service at the Anglican Church along the street on Sunday mornings.

. . . Twenty thousand pounds, the thoughts were crowding into his mind as he walked through the dispensary, across the passage, and into the breakfast room. “Would you accept twenty thousand for it?” Oh, rubbish! Twenty thousand pounds. “Yes, our representative will instruct you how to drive the car. Driving a car is really quite a simple matter. Would you care to take a lesson this afternoon?” Oh, nonsense. . . .

From the sitting room there came the sound of subdued voices. He came into the sitting room. The sofa was drawn aside, and in front of the revealed picture stood Mrs. Moffatt and a clean-shaved, grey-headed man, who looked shorter than he was owing to the way he stooped. His head was abnormally large, the skin of his face was deeply lined, and he wore perched on his big nose a pair of gold-rimmed pince-nez. He was adjusting these pince-nez with both hands, and peering through them with his face thrust forward at the picture. He heard Mr. Moffatt’s entry, and looked up, at the same time removing his glasses.

“Oh, good morning!” he exclaimed very softly, and smiling. “You are Mr. Moffatt?”

“Yes, Sir Wilbur,” Mr. Moffatt responded, and felt patronised. Mrs. Moffatt watched him under the process of meeting Sir Wilbur Canes, and

he felt he was looking important.

“Mr. Head will have told you I was coming?” Sir Wilbur sought to confirm.

“Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes!”

“I'm sorry I've been obliged to call so early,” Sir Wilbur apologised very quietly, almost in a whisper. “I had arranged to go with a party of friends motoring for the day, and it wasn't far out of our way to come on here. I hope you don't mind.”

“Oh, quite all right. Oh, it's perfectly all right!”

“I've just been glancing at your picture here,” Sir Wilbur smiled. He turned to it again, replacing his pince-nez with his two hands.

“Oh, yes!” said Mr. Moffatt. He was thinking:

. . . I know it's not an old master. It's a plain picture not worth even twenty pounds. I'm not disappointed. I knew all the time it wasn't valuable. I never expected it to be worth much. I'll send it to another auction-room. I tell you I'm not the slightest bit disappointed. . . .

“It's a very beautiful piece of work,” commented Sir Wilbur, in his soft voice, looking intently through his pince-nez.

. . . But that's all, thought Mr. Moffatt, his heart still beating to an unaccustomed rhythm. . . .

“Colours are exquisite,” continued Sir Wilbur. It was almost as though he were speaking to himself. Mr. Moffatt had to strain his hearing to catch the precious words. “Expressions on the faces are perfect. Bodies of the figures above the gate are beautifully formed. Faces on them are really lovely. Diffusion of sunlight perfectly done. Whole thing is obviously symbolical. The group of people here, the little gateway, the figures over the gateway, the nude figure of the man. There's a star over the temple. The light seems spread all over the space beyond the trees, but it is concentrated particularly on the man. Very beautifully done. Very beautiful, indeed. Contrast of colour is very striking. Clothing on these people suggests old Dutch dress. H'm. Very striking. These floating figures over the gateway are almost good enough for Correggio. The rich colouring, too. But it doesn't belong to his period. So it couldn't be Correggio.”

Mr. and Mrs. Moffatt looked at the picture with Sir Wilbur and were hushed in silence. They seemed scarcely to breathe as he went on commenting. Mr. Moffatt, between intervals of following the trend of Sir Wilbur's remarks, was reflecting:

. . . Twenty thousand pounds. I'm quite prepared, whatever he decides. Twenty thousand pounds. At five per cent. Twenty thousand pounds. It isn't worth anything. I'm just going to go on working here. Twenty thousand pounds. . . .

“Yet it hardly suggests Dutch work,” proceeded Sir Wilbur. “Unless it was an early work of De Hooch. The lighting would suggest De Hooch. H'm! It might almost suggest Vermeer, for that matter. The contrast of the blue in the dresses and the yellow of the sunlight is certainly characteristic of Vermeer. But I'm not so sure about the subject—whether he would have done a work of this kind. Symbolical—quite symbolical. I don't suppose it's the gateway of heaven. I hardly think that. I don't know exactly what it is supposed to represent. The period of the dress is definitely seventeenth-century Dutch. There's no shadow of doubt about that. Which would bring us back to De Hooch or Vermeer. If it wasn't for the subject—H'm! Very beautiful. No question of that. No trace of a signature. There are so many pictures known to have been painted by Vermeer that have not come to light yet. He was neglected for a couple of centuries after he died. It is difficult to say positively that any particular subject or kind of subject was not used by him. Very beautiful indeed. The light on the tops of those trees is exquisite. He was thought very little of in his day, you know. Died very poor. His pictures are worth fortunes now.”

Thump!—thump!—thump!—thump!—went Mr. Moffatt's heart. He swallowed a lump in his throat and observed through dry lips:

“Ahem! Mr. Head—ahem!—mentioned the possibility of—of—er—Ver—er—Vermeer.”

Sir Wilbur did not cease to gaze at the picture.

“It's very hard to say,” he replied, so very, very softly. “Many features do certainly suggest Vermeer. On the other hand, other things make it doubtful. No doubt of its being a beautiful piece of work. Despite the unequal grouping of the figures on either side of the canvas, there is no effect of disharmony. It's just the way the thing's been done. I should like to know what it is intended to portray. I suppose they would be some kind of scaphim or angels of some sort. They have flaming swords in their hands. It's hardly the Garden of Eden. Not with all those seventeenth-century Dutch people outside. And there's the nude figure of the man walking towards the temple. That's supposed to represent something, of course. I presume he has been able to pass safely by the angels with their flaming swords. H'm!”

He turned his face towards Mr. Moffatt.

“I'm very glad indeed to have had the privilege of seeing it,” he remarked. “It's a very interesting picture.”

Mr. Moffatt swallowed another lump in his throat. A throbbing had set up now in his head. He seemed to feel that a great quantity of blood was surging up his face. His cheeks felt excessively warm. He was still looking at the picture, and the details of it were becoming blurred before his eyes.

He felt that he did not want to look at Sir Wilbur Canes. But he wanted to seem quite calm, quite natural. He was conscious of a set expression on his face, but he felt he had no power to change it. In his mind the thoughts flowed on:

. . . All right, it's not worth anything. Say whatever you like. Don't be afraid to say what you think. Tell me straight out that it's worthless. Twenty thousand pounds. Nobody would pay much for it. Twenty thousand pounds. . . .

"Yes," Sir Wilbur repeated, "I'm very glad to have seen it."

He had removed his pince-nez, and was hiding them away in a little black case which he drew out of a waistcoat pocket.

. . . Not going away, is he? reflected Mr. Moffatt. . . .

He had a strong desire to ask Sir Wilbur a host of questions. But he could form none of them into words. He was handicapped chiefly by his desire to seem calm. Had he allowed himself to appear excited, he could have launched a whole series of questions. Mrs. Moffatt's brain was clearer.

"You don't think it's a Vermeer, then, do you?" she asked.

Sir Wilbur drew out his little black case again, extracted his pince-nez, pulled them on to his nose with both hands, and peered once more at the picture.

. . . It's all over, Mr. Moffatt was thinking. It's not a Vermeer or a De Hooch or a Rembrandt or a Correggio or any other master. I had an instinct that it wasn't from the first. . . .

"I wouldn't like to say that it wasn't a Vermeer," replied Sir Wilbur, quietly, after a while.

. . . But you really *think* that it isn't, reflected Mr. Moffatt. . . .

"In some ways it is very characteristic of a Vermeer," Sir Wilbur added. "And it is certainly his period. Still, that is not enough. Very beautiful—the way that light is made to concentrate on the nude figure of the man. Yes."

He was removing his pince-nez again, and slipping them into their little black case.

Mr. Moffatt could actually feel his heart beating. The throbbing in his head was developing into a headache.

Sir Wilbur had popped his little black case back into his waistcoat pocket. He looked at Mr. Moffatt. His eyes seemed unnatural and strained without his pince-nez. He opened them very wide as he asked:

"What do you propose to do with the picture, Mr.—er—Moffatt?"

. . . Twenty thousand pounds, were the words registering in Mr. Moffatt's brain. I'm not disappointed. I was quite prepared for this. . . .

"Oh," he said, "I—er—haven't—er—I haven't definitely decided—yet."

. . . Auction sale, he was thinking. No, I won't tell him I was going to

send it to another sale. He might go to the sale, buy the thing cheaply and sell it again for a fortune. Twenty thousand pounds. Be careful what I say. Twenty thousand pounds. . . .

“I might decide to keep it here,” he added.

“What would you *advise* us to do with it, Sir Wilbur?” asked Mrs. Moffatt.

. . . Yes, reflected Mr. Moffatt. That's what I wanted to say. What are we to do? . . .

“Well,” said Sir Wilbur, very softly and as if he were suggesting a most ordinary course, “it would certainly be worth while taking it to London. If it proves genuine, you know, it will more than repay you.”

. . . Twenty thousand pounds, were the words in Mr. Moffatt's mind. . . .

“Oh, I know,” he said, looking at the carpet and at his polished black shoes against the carpet's reds and browns. “I know.”

. . . To London? his mind went on. How the devil can I afford to go to London? . . .

He was feeling very disappointed.

“You wouldn't say—you wouldn't express a definite opinion about the picture?” Mrs. Moffatt inquired.

Sir Wilbur looked again at the picture, his hand instinctively travelling to the little black pince-nez case in his waistcoat pocket. He did not resort to his pince-nez, however.

“If it was known that Vermeer had painted a picture of this kind,” he declared quietly, “I'd feel inclined to say this was a Vermeer.”

“Oh?” from Mrs. Moffatt.

Mr. Moffatt felt very downcast.

“But I should certainly have it sent to London,” went on Sir Wilbur, in his soft voice. “If you can't go yourself, you could send the picture and appoint somebody in London to act for you.”

. . . I'd never do that, reflected Mr. Moffatt, still looking at the carpet. . . .

“If you decided to do that,” added Sir Wilbur, “you could let me know, and I could give you the names and addresses of one or two people you could write to in London. Personal friends of mine, I mean.”

. . . I don't like that idea, continued Mr. Moffatt's thoughts. . . .

“You don't think it *isn't* a Vermeer?” pursued Mrs. Moffatt. “You wouldn't say that?”

Sir Wilbur smiled.

“Ah,” he said, looking at the picture again. “You want me to give a definite opinion, don't you?”

Mr. Moffatt looked up from the carpet.

. . . Yes, his thoughts went on, that's what I want. . . .

Sir Wilbur paused. Mr. Moffatt was all expectancy.

Sir Wilbur shook his head.

"No," he said. "I've told you what I think. Take it to London. I wouldn't advise you to do that if I were not greatly impressed with the picture. I am, indeed. But nobody in Australia is so qualified to speak about a work of this kind as the best authorities in London. You would have to get Sir Arthur Mallesing or some other authority on the seventeenth-century period in Dutch art to declare his opinion. Sir Ernest Glades is an eminent authority on Vermeer's work. You'd want to get him to examine it." He paused, then added: "Very many thanks for letting me see it."

"Oh, quite all right! Oh, we're very glad to— I'm very pleased—great pleasure—" muttered Mr. Moffatt.

"I must apologise again for coming so early," went on Sir Wilbur.

Mr. Moffatt shook his head.

"No, no! Nothing! Quite all right! Quite all right!"

"My friends will be thinking I'm a long time," said Sir Wilbur, glancing at the window, through which it was not possible to see the motor-car waiting outside. "I think I'd better go. Thank you very much."

"Quite all right! Quite all right!"

"Beautiful morning, isn't it?" Sir Wilbur remarked, as he was escorted into the hall and to the front door.

"Oh—yes, yes!" Mr. Moffatt agreed. "Beautiful! Oh yes! Oh yes, very beautiful!"

"You know," Sir Wilbur whispered before bidding good-bye, "if you were to have it accepted in London as a genuine old master, we'd be pleased at the Sydney Art Gallery to make you an offer for it."

"Oh, of course!" exclaimed Mr. Moffatt. "Yes, yes!"

As Sir Wilbur walked across the pavement and climbed into the waiting motor-car beside two other men, Mr. Moffatt had a feeling of wanting to take hold of the little man by the neck and shake him, the while he angrily demanded: "Now, you just tell me what it is—a master or not! I must *know!* I must know for certain!"

But there was a gentle murmuring from under the motor-car bonnet, and Sir Wilbur and his friends were gone.

Gone. . . .

Mrs. Moffatt had returned to the sitting room and was seated in an armchair. Mr. Moffatt banged the front door and followed her.

"Oh, I'm glad he's gone," declared Mrs. Moffatt. "I've been longing to sit down."

"Are you so tired?"

"I've got a touch of that pain again."

“Have you, dear? In your side, you mean?”

“Mmmmm!”

Mr. Moffatt was very conscious of the picture's proximity and the problems concerning it. But he felt he did not want to look at it or think about it. He was glad to be able to speak on some other subject.

“Shall I get you something?” he asked, bending over her.

“Oh no, no, dear! It's not that bad. It will go off soon. It's done so before.”

“It may be just a touch of wind.”

“Yes, it will go away shortly. You go off to church,” she said, looking up at the clock. “It's not eleven yet.”

He wanted to do something, go somewhere, anywhere. Church would occupy him for an hour. There was no need for him to miss it.

He kissed her good-bye.

II. His Worship

He frowned into the hall-stand mirror as he adjusted his felt hat on his head. His heart was still thumping hard, and he had the headache. There were strange twinges in his arm and in his fingers as he raised his hand to twist open the Yale lock on the front door.

. . . Twenty thousand pounds. Twenty thousand pounds. . . .

The words kept recurring in his brain.

He was trying to be calm as he pulled open the door to expose himself to the world, trying to act as if there were not any twinges in his arm and fingers.

The tiles on the narrow, railed verandah, the pavement, and the six intersecting roads all glared in the bright summer sunshine, and made his headache worse. He pulled the door shut behind him, stepped off the black-leaded doorstep on to the door-mat, unfastened and pulled open the squeaking iron gate, and stepped through it from the verandah level to the asphalt pavement.

. . . Twenty thousand pounds. Twenty thousand pounds, went his thoughts, as he drew the squeaking iron gate with a clack into place. Oh, shut up, shut up! Nonsense! Very hot to-day. Regular scorcher. . . .

A motor-car purred by, raising a swelling cloud of dust from the hot, parched roadway. The bell was ringing in the tower of St. Timothy's Church of England, fifty yards away. Dong!—dong!—dong!—monotonously; growing in volume, then dying away, with the little breeze that was blowing.

He turned to the right and walked along the pavement past his display

window exhibiting the big male face, happy under its cloud of Eezy-Kwick Shaving Stick lather. As he walked by and was conscious of the pasteboard face, he was conscious also that such an intimate view of a face under lather was somehow incongruous on a respectable Sunday morning. All the shops were shut, and the shop pavements deserted but for a man with a bathing suit and a towel in his hand, waiting at the tram-stop.

Mr. Moffatt passed the shop, left the pavement, and crossed the street. The grinding noise of a tram-car approaching in the direction of the beach became louder and louder and the tram came into sight. The bell in St. Timothy's tower could not be heard above the noise of it. The rumbling tram stopped opposite the pharmacy, and in the few moment's quiet before it moved away again, the monotonous dong!—dong!—dong!—dong! of the bell in the tower of St. Timothy's rose and fell again to the blowing of the breeze.

Mr. Moffatt had now reached the pavement of the street in which St. Timothy's stood. He looked back at the tram to see the numbers of light-suited young men with towels and bathing suits seated in it. The tram started again, but he was near enough now to St. Timothy's to hear the bell above the roaring of the tram.

. . . “When do you sail for London, Mr. Moffatt?” his mind went on. “Did you hear about Mr. Moffatt's good fortune? Oh, yes, he went home to England, you know, with that famous picture of his. That's where he got all his money. He sold the thing, you know, for fifty thousand pounds. Think of it! Fifty thousand! Oh, of course he disposed of his business. He wasn't long about that. O-o-oh yes! Yes, the last I heard of him he was with his family touring the continent. He bought a motor-car in England, you know, and took it over to France. Then he motored with his family all through France and Italy. They had the most wonderful time, I believe. He was going to take a steamer at Naples and go across to Egypt. From there—” Oh, shut up! I'm not going to think about this blessed picture. I can't reason clearly about it yet. It makes my head ache too much. I'm going to keep it right out of my mind. Later on I'll consider what I'll do. Fifty thousand pounds. Be quiet, be quiet! . . .

There were well-dressed men and women, some with children, walking slowly along the sunny asphalt pavement towards St. Timothy's from Six Ways Cross, others approaching St. Timothy's from the opposite direction.

Dong!—dong!—dong!—dong! went the bell.

He was walking past a terrace of houses, at the front gate of one of which a young woman in a white dress stood holding a child by the hand. A man was shutting the front door.

“Good morning, Mr. Moffatt!” said the young woman.

“Oh, good morning!” responded Mr. Moffatt, smiling broadly and raising his hat. He walked a little faster.

. . . What's their name again? he was thinking. She came in for that lotion the other day. Don't want to have to talk to them. I don't know what to say to them. Menzies—that's the name. On the tip of my tongue. And there's old Mrs. Winklebottle in front. I don't want to catch up to her, or I'll have to chatter to her. I'll walk a bit slower, and she'll get into church just ahead of me. But the Menzies are just behind you. If you slow down they'll catch up to you. Oh, bother them! Haven't a blessed thing I want to say to them. And this headache! Oh, confound the flies! Wretched—wrrrrf!—*get away!* . . .

He slapped his hand on to his cheek, caught a fly against it, carefully seized the insect between the tips of his fingers, squashed the life out of it, and dropped its remains on to the pavement.

Dong!—dong!—dong!—dong!

. . . Slow as a hearse—that old Mrs. Winklebottle, he went on thinking. . .

He could hear the voices of the young Mr. and Mrs. Menzies not far behind him.

. . . I'll walk quickly past Mrs. Winklebottle, he reflected, as if I didn't notice who it was. Oh, she might be offended. I'll raise my hat to her as I walk by. She'll think I'm in a great hurry about something. But then she'll see you go into church. She knows you're aware that she's going to church too, and you've no excuse for not walking there with her. Oh, botheration. Go on, woman, hurry up. . . .

Dong!—dong!—dong!—dong!

He managed to reach St. Timothy's still a pace behind Mrs. Winklebottle and ahead of the young Mr. and Mrs. Menzies. This success made him feel happier. He walked through the gates, along the gravel path and into the stone-paved, shaded porch under the tower. The bell was right overhead now and very loud.

Dong!—dong!—dong!—dong!

He stepped in front of Mrs. Winklebottle, pushed open the church door and held it open for the old lady to enter.

“Good morning, Mrs. Winklebottle!” he said, smiling warmly and removing his hat.

“Oh, good morning, sir!” said Mrs. Winklebottle, looking up at him.

He felt that he had worked it very well to greet Mrs. Winklebottle cheerily, yet not have to chat to her.

. . . Twenty thousand pounds, went his thoughts as he turned to his right and tip-toed down the faded red aisle carpet towards his pew near the

pulpit. . . .

Beams of sunshine filtered through the tall painted presentation windows on the right-hand side of the church, passing over the pews next to the right-hand wall and striking the pews in the middle. But the air in the church was refreshingly cool after the heat outside. There was an awesome quiet—a stillness broken just a little by a series of sharp taps from the direction of the organ, where the organist was adjusting his stops.

Mr. Moffatt felt hushed and ashamed of the way his mind kept repeating, twenty thousand pounds, twenty thousand pounds. Such a mundane subject as money seemed out of place in the solemn atmosphere of St. Timothy's.

A noble and swelling chord was sounded on the organ as he slipped modestly into his pew, laid his hat on the seat, bent down, pulled the red faded hassock towards him, kneeled on it, and leaned his forehead against the edge of the pew desk. For several moments that he remained kneeling his mind was filled with the rich, majestic notes from the organ pipes above the altar, which echoed through the body of the church. The dong!—dong!—of the bell in the tower could not be heard above the music. He remembered that he should pray, and tried to fix his mind on some devotional theme.

. . . It's just a touch of wind that makes Florence have those pains now and then, he began to reflect. They don't last long. Roast beef. Underdone. Yorkshire pudding. Oh God!—er—as Thou hast given us a bright sun in the sky to-day—er—help us—er—to—er—always have the sun of Thy—er—love—and—er—er—in our hearts. Roast potatoes. Gravy. Fruit salad. Cream. Er—er—in His name, oh God! You've been kneeling down enough now. Jesus Christ's sake. Amen. I don't see how on earth I'm going to get the money for the fare to England. I simply haven't got it. Send the picture, and appoint someone to deal with it in London for you. Oh, be quiet! I'm not going to think about it now. Makes my head ache. Take an aspirin when I get back. . . .

He raised himself on to his seat.

The white-fronted choir boys are now sitting in their places in the chancel, and whispering surreptitiously with twisted lips and with averted heads and eyes. The polished, bald pate of the Reverend Thomas Hetchings is evident above the edge of his desk, before which he is kneeling. He lifts his head, and takes a deep breath as he sits back and looks at the roof as if trying to remember something. He has a clean-shaven, expansive face, small, pale brown eyes, a long nose, and a wide mouth with rather thin lips. There is an expression of indifference on his face as he listens to the voluntary on the organ. Then he takes a pair of rimless spectacles from a spectacle case, and adjusts them before his eyes. He turns his face towards

the nave and surveys the congregation-over the top of his glasses.

Now the last note of the organ has died away, the bell has stopped ringing in the tower, and everything is oppressively quiet as Mr. Hetchings rises slowly from his seat and alternately looking down at his big prayer book and up at the wall opposite him, begins in a voice that sometimes grows loud and at other times fades away to softness:

“When the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness that he hath committed, and doeth that which is lawful and right——”

Mr. Moffatt stood in his pew, his prayer-book open at the place headed, The Order for Morning Prayer.

. . . It's out of the question, a trip to London, he was thinking. What would it cost? Even second-class, quite a hundred and fifty pounds in fares alone. Then there are the expenses in London. There'd be a man to pay here too, to manage the shop while I'm away. Oh, I'm not going to think about it now. . . .

“Dearly beloved brethren,” Mr. Hetchings was saying quickly, “the scripture moveth us in sundry places to acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickedness and that we should not dissemble or cloak them before Almighty God——”

. . . The whole difficulty of the passage money is solved, Mr. Moffatt's mind went on, if you send the picture and entrust it to somebody in London. One of Sir Wilbur Canes's friends. Oh, I don't know. Yes, all your money problem solved. . . .

“—I pray and beseech you as many as are here present——” continued Mr. Hetchings.

. . . It could all be done very simply, continued Mr. Moffatt's mind. And the results would be just the same to you. Sir Wilbur Canes would probably be willing to write personally to one of his friends about the picture. All you'd have to do would be to have the picture packed properly, and arrange with a firm of carriers to take it from the house and have it shipped to Tilbury. That's the obvious thing to do when you're short of money. . . .

“—With a pure heart and humble voice,” proceeded Mr. Hetchings, “unto the throne of the heavenly grace saying after me——”

Mr. Moffatt followed the example of Mr. Hetchings and the members of the congregation in lowering himself into a kneeling posture on his faded red hassock.

“Almighty and most merciful Father,” he muttered rapidly with the general hum of murmurings: “We have erred and strayed from Thy ways like lost sheep we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts we have offended against Thy holy laws we have left undone

those things which we ought to have done and we have done those things which we ought not to have done and there is no health in us but Thou O Lord have mercy upon us miserable offenders——”

And he was thinking:

. . . “Yes, I'm leaving for England next week. Oh yes, yes! Going *via* Suez, you know. Yes, I'll be glad to see the old country again after all these years. Thirty-three years since I was there. Yes, it's all that time. I was a lad of twenty when I left. Eighteen ninety-one. I remember well enough. Yes, I expect I'll find London changed. Yes, I think I'll try to find time to run up to Bridg-north. Yes, I was brought up there. Oh, I know! It will be a wonderful experience to see the old town again. Yes, I've often wondered whether the place has altered much since I was a boy. The old High-street, eh! I suppose they'll have pulled down that old row of shops. It'd be funny if they haven't. I wonder if the old place is still used as a tailor's. Tch, tch! Might still have the old name outside! I'll always remember the day when the cow got loose and charged through the window. Huh, huh!” . . .

Mr. Hetchings was standing up again while the congregation remained on their knees.

“Almighty God,” he was saying, looking at the roof, “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who desireth not the death of a sinner but rather that he may turn from his wickedness and live and hath given power and commandment to His ministers——”

. . . It's so unsatisfactory, went on Mr. Moffatt's thoughts as he knelt on the hassock with his fore-head against the pew desk, to trust somebody I've never seen with a picture that might prove to be worth thousands of pounds. Thousands of pounds. Twenty thousand pounds. It's a hundred to one that if the man said he could only get five thousand for the thing, I'd suspect he was doing me out of ten thousand or so. . . .

“—And unfeignedly believe His holy Gospel wherefore let us beseech him to grant us true repentance and His Holy Spirit that those things may please Him which we do at this present——”

. . . “If it proves genuine, you know,” went on Mr. Moffatt's mind, “it will more than repay you.” Sir Wilbur definitely said that. And he said, “I wouldn't advise you to take it to London if I were not greatly impressed with the picture.” And, “many features do certainly suggest Vermeer.” Twenty thousand pounds. Perhaps more. Thirty thousand—fifty thousand. Oh, it'd repay me, right enough. Trip to England. See London again. Go to Bridgnorth. Twenty thousand pounds. Cheque. Cable. “Picture genuine. Offered twenty thousand. Am demanding thirty thousand. Congratulate me.” . . .

His heart was beating fast again.

“—Through Jesus Christ our Lord,” Mr. Hetchings' voice was slowing down.

“Amen!” mumbled Mr. Moffatt.

“Our Father which art in Heaven,” he continued, with Mr. Hetchings and the rest of the congregation, his thoughts proceeding:

. . . What would fifty thousand be—at five per cent.? A shilling in the pound. Tch, tch! Two thousand five hundred a year! . . .

“—Give us this day our daily bread——”

. . . Fifty pounds a week! . . .

“—And lead us not into temptation——”

. . . Head thinks it's a Vermeer. And Sir Wilbur Canes thinks so, but he won't commit himself. That damned picture's genuine. Worth a fortune. You'd be a fool to trust it into anybody else's hands. Take it to London yourself. Fifty pounds a week! But it's the money for the fare I want. Fifty pounds a week! . . .

“—For ever and ever——”

. . . If I knew where I could borrow the fare from——. It's only a matter of getting to England with the picture. If it brought only ten thousand—only five thousand—even three thousand. . . .

“Oh Lord open Thou our lips,” Mr. Hetchings appealed.

“And our mouth shall shew forth Thy praise,” muttered Mr. Moffatt in response.

“Oh God make speed to save us!”

“Oh Lord make haste to help us.”

. . . *It can scarcely fail* to be worth your while to go home to England! Like to go on one of those new Orient liners. Beautiful ships. Call at Colombo, Port Said, Naples, Toulon, Gibraltar—London Christie's, I suppose. “Forty-five thousand I'm offered. Is there any advance on forty-five thousand? This exquisite painting by Vermeer. Forty-eight thousand I'm bid. Is there any advance on forty-eight thousand pounds? For the third and last time: Is there any advance on——? *Fifty* thousand I'm bid. Fifty thousand. Fifty thousand. Fifty thousand pounds. Guineas. I'm offered fifty thousand guineas. Is there any advance on——?” . . .

“Praise ye the Lord!” Mr. Hetchings was suggesting.

“The Lord's name be praised,” Mr. Moffatt mumbled in answer. He was standing now. He sat down again.

“Er—psalm—er—eighty—er—eighty— eighty-six. Psalm eighty-six,” announced Mr. Hetchings. “Bow down Thine ear, Oh Lord, and hear me: for I am poor and in misery.”

. . . . Say the second-class fare was round about a hundred and sixty to a hundred and seventy return, pursued Mr. Moffatt's thoughts as he twitched

over the leaves of his little prayer-book in search of psalm eighty-six. Better say a hundred and ninety. Well, say two hundred pounds. I'd spend ten pounds during the voyage. Now let me see, psalm eighty-six. That's two hundred pounds. Then the expenses in London. . . .

The organ had begun to play and he stood up again.

“Bow down Thine ear, Oh Lord——”

. . . Imagine I had to stay in London a month. Four weeks. Say I spent ten pounds a week. I'd want to go about a bit and see a few places. That's forty pounds. Say fifty pounds. There's two hundred and fifty pounds I'd want. And that leaves nothing for emergencies. I ought to have three hundred pounds clear. Where can I borrow three hundred pounds? Damn this headache! Throb, throb, throb! . . .

“—For Thou art great, and doest wondrous things: Thou art God alone. Teach me Thy way, O Lord——”

. . . Three hundred pounds. Oh, be quiet! My blessed head. I'm not going to think about all this. . . .

“—Oh God, the proud are risen against me: and the congregation of naughty men have sought after my soul——”

. . . Trouble is, went on Mr. Moffatt's reflections, I've still got four hundred pounds to pay the bank before the shop is absolutely my own. Another two years before I'm clear of that. How much easier to stay at home and just *send* the picture. A friend of Sir Wilbur Canes's would deal fairly with you. Oh, be quiet. I don't know. . . .

The organ had ceased, Mr. Moffatt sat down again, and Mr. Hetchings was walking to the lectern.

. . . To England *via* United States, pursued Mr. Moffatt's mind. Could go that way. Across the Pacific. Call at South Sea Islands, San Francisco, Niagara Falls. New York. Skyscrapers. Statue of Liberty. Across the Atlantic. Land at Southampton. By train to Waterloo. “Taxi, taxi!” Oh nonsense. “They expect at Christie's to get quite eighty thousand for it. I'll be satisfied with fifty thousand.” Rubbish! . . .

“Here beginneth,” declared Mr. Hetchings, looking up from the big Bible before which he stood, “here beginneth the first verse of the twenty-fifth chapter of the book of Exodus, And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying——”

. . . You could easily get the bank to lend you three hundred pounds. And then that'd be seven hundred I'd owe them! Oh, this blessed headache! I don't know *what* to do. Yes, you do. Don't borrow any more. Send the picture by itself. I simply *don't know*. . . .

“—And this is the offering ye shall take of them,” continued Mr. Hetchings: “gold and silver and brass and blue and purple and scarlet and

fine linen and goats' hair and rams' skins dyed red and badgers' skins and shittim wood, oil for the light, spices for anointing and for sweet incense, onyx stones and stones to be set in the ephod and in the breastplate. And let them——”

III. His Judgment

At one o'clock, Mrs. Moffatt and Naomi sat down to dinner. Mr. Moffatt stood in his place at the head of the table before a dish containing a hot, brown, shiny, greasy loin of roast pork. A shallow sea of brownish oily juice lapped the shores of the meat as he pushed the big two-pronged fork into it and with the long knife began by a to and fro motion to slice down between the crackling.

Mrs. Moffatt in her seat opposite him was faced with two covered dishes on rush mats. As Mr. Moffatt began to carve, she lifted off the lids to release two great clouds of steam.

“What is it to-day?” asked Mr. Moffatt, craning his neck over the pork. “Roast potatoes, eh?”

“And what else?” challenged Mrs. Moffatt.

“H'm! Green peas,” he divined through the clouds. “That's good. I like peas.”

Noami faced a plate on which lay two articles of the appearance of rissoles, covered with bread-crumbs and in colour a goldy brown. She passed her plate to Mrs. Moffatt.

“I'll have some peas,” she announced. “Not many though.”

“All right,” consented Mrs. Moffatt, and with a spoon began to scoop shiny, dark green peas from their dish on to Naomi's plate.

“That's enough,” declared Naomi, when a little pile had grown beside the rissoles.

“No potato?” asked Mrs. Moffatt, pausing with her spoon over the potato dish.

Naomi took her plate away.

“Goodness, no!” she exclaimed. “In this hot weather! I don't know how you can eat them.” She picked up her fork and pressed the edge of it into a rissole. “I'd be as heavy and depressed as possible if I ate potatoes in this weather. Do you know that apart from water a potato is practically all starch? Clogs you up. Of course, how you can eat pork on a day like this——!”

She thrust a portion of rissole into her mouth and masticated.

. . . Oh, be blowed! reflected Mr. Moffatt, as he cut into the pale flesh. I like roast potato. And I like pork. Don't know how she can resist the smell

of it. And the sight of this crackling—! I wonder does she really feel tempted to have some and only *say* she doesn't like it. “Just *one* nice, juicy slice, Naomi, and a couple of bits of crackling. With a little apple sauce and some stuffing and a touch of gravy. Come on now!” Oh no, I won't say that to her. Only annoy her. I could never make a meal of what she eats. What *are* those things she has? Well, ask her. No, she'll think I'm hankering to begin her diet, only not having the courage to say so. Nuts, I suppose they have in them. Or cheese. . . .

“Too much for you, dear?” he asked Mrs. Moffatt as he passed a plate of slices of pork and pieces of crackling to her.

“Yes—by far,” Mrs. Moffatt estimated, as she took delivery. “I'll give this to you.”

He began to slice again. Juice oozed out as he pressed the knife into the meat. He felt a keen appetite for it.

. . . Those things Naomi eats, continued his thoughts, mean much more work for Florence. Two separate dinners it means. Well, why don't you try Naomi's diet? That would help Florence. Oh, never—never! Eggs you like, cheese you like, nuts and beans you like. Oh, but I could never do without meat. You don't know. You haven't tried. Naomi can do without it. Oh, but I don't know whether Florence would like to try doing without it. Well, ask her. Oh, no, no. Oh, be bothered, I like meat. . . .

He passed up the second plate, and received the first back complete with peas, potatoes, apple sauce, stuffing, and gravy. He eyed the articles with relish, sat down, reached for the mustard, partook of mustard, sprinkled salt liberally, and began to cut through a slab of pork. He pasted mustard on a piece he removed, and thrust it into his mouth. Chew, chew, chew! He succeeded in knifing off a short length of crisp, fatty crackling and put that too into his mouth. A lump of stuffing went in, and a portion of roast potato dipped in gravy and smothered in apple sauce. Finally he speared a series of peas and fed them to his mouth in quotas. Then he chewed and chewed the mustard-flavoured pork, the fatty crackling, the stuffing, the gravy-moistened potato, the apple sauce, and the green peas. Delicious!

. . . You're a glutton, his thoughts went on, the way you wolf all this food. Florence must think so, and Naomi. Oh, rubbish. No harm in *liking* your food. But you know that if you were dining out somewhere you'd eat much more slowly. . . .

He began to remove a further portion of pork.

“Have you decided anything about what Sir Wilbur Canes said?” Mrs. Moffatt inquired, as she displayed activity among the variety of materials on her own plate.

“Oh, no,” Mr. Moffatt answered, shaking his head. “I've scarcely given it

a thought.”

. . . Well, I haven't really, he reflected. . . .

“What did Sir Wilbur Canes say?” asked Naomi, spearing peas and looking to Mrs. Moffatt.

. . . You see, reflected Mr. Moffatt, chewing, she doesn't turn to me for an answer. I'm a dead letter. Twenty thousand pounds. . . .

“Oh,” Mrs. Moffatt informed, bisecting a small roast potato, “he seemed to be very much impressed with it—didn't he, John?”

“Oh—well—yes,” agreed Mr. Moffatt, before he entrusted another slice of pork to his mouth.

“But did he think it was a Vermeer?” pursued Naomi. She showed her interest by suspending her spearing of peas until her curiosity was satisfied.

“He wouldn't say definitely,” explained Mrs. Moffatt. “He thought the picture was very characteristic of Vermeer, but he wouldn't say it *was* a Vermeer.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Naomi, pouted her lips, and put her forkful of peas into her mouth.

. . . Yes, thought Mr. Moffatt; she thinks that ends the matter. But it doesn't. . . .

He felt impatient that Mrs. Moffatt had not told all.

“But he recommended me to take it to London,” he put in, hastily swallowing a ball of partly-masticated pork, peas and potato, in order to do it. “He wouldn't say it wasn't a Vermeer. In fact, anyone could see,” he added, almost angrily, “that he thoroughly believed the picture *was* a Vermeer. But he didn't consider his opinion equal to the opinions of authorities in London. The thing is, he thinks it *is* a Vermeer. But what he says is, take it to London and have his opinion confirmed. It's just a matter of getting the London experts to see it,” he declared, and laid down his knife to tap the fingers of his right hand on the edge of the table in emphasis.

“Oh, I don't think he was so sure as that,” Mrs. Moffatt moderated. She sprinkled more salt over her vegetables.

“I tell you he was,” maintained Mr. Moffatt.

“It's going to be worth thousands, then,” said Naomi.

“Well—it looks like it,” said Mr. Moffatt.

“Don't be too hopeful, John,” warned Mrs. Moffatt. “You'll build up on this thing, and then you'll be awfully disappointed if you don't get the money.”

. . . Rubbish! he reflected, and chewed and swallowed pork extra hard. . . .

.

“You don't mean to say you're thinking of going home to England with

the picture, do you?" Mrs. Moffatt inquired, looking up at him from the meat she had been cutting across.

"Why not?" he returned. He did not look up from the potato he was turning over and over in gravy.

"My dear! Why not! Look at the money you'd want!"

"Is father going home to England?" demanded Naomi, looking at her father and mother alternately.

"No, no," said Mrs. Moffatt. "You're not *really* thinking of going, are you, John?"

"Oh, merciful heavens!" he exclaimed. "I simply haven't *thought* about it yet."

. . . Bother this headache, he was thinking, and sighed a little as he squashed peas with his fork and put them into his mouth in the form of mush. Colombo, his thoughts went on. Watching native boys dive for pennies. "Did you see, Moffatt? That was *your* penny the little beggar brought up that time. Ha, ha, ha!" "Yes, very clever, aren't they? Ha, ha, ha!" . . .

"It'd be foolish to waste several hundred pounds on a trip to England," Mrs. Moffatt offered the opinion, "and then find that the picture was worth very little. Don't you think so, John?"

Mr. Moffatt shrugged his shoulders while he swallowed.

"I haven't said one word about going to England with the blessed picture," he protested.

. . . Through the Red Sea, his mind was pushing on. Suez Canal. Natives on the banks. Camels. Desert sands. "Oh yes, it's pretty hot, isn't it? I'll be glad when we're out of it." . . .

"What will you do, then?" asked Mrs. Moffatt.

"I'll just have to think about it," he skirmished.

"I certainly think it would be worth while sending it to London," Mrs. Moffatt declared, and loaded a potato with apple sauce.

Mr. Moffatt did not contest the opinion.

"It would be foolish not to let some London experts see the picture," Mrs. Moffatt added. "Of course, you never know. It *may* turn out to be worth ten thousand pounds or so."

. . . Twenty thousand pounds, Mr. Moffatt's thoughts continued. Twenty thousand pounds. . . .

"Don't you think it would be *worth* sending to London?" Mrs. Moffatt asked him.

He cut away at more pork.

. . . In the Mediterranean, he was thinking. Calling at Toulon. "Oh, yes, yes, I'm leaving the boat and taking the train to Paris. Yes, I'll be a few

days in Paris. Oh, just to have a look round. Then I'm off for Calais—and London.” . . .

“I don't know *what* on earth to do about it,” he said, and drew a deep breath.

“You could easily send the thing to London,” remarked Naomi, looking at her mother, “and get somebody to have it looked at. It would be ridiculous not to send it to London if there's a possibility of getting ten thousand pounds for it.”

. . . Twenty thousand pounds—thirty thousand —fifty thousand, reflected Mr. Moffatt. . . .

“That's just what *I* think,” said Mrs. Moffatt. “Do you really mean to say, John, that you're thinking of trying again to sell it here in Sydney? —after what Sir Wilbur Canes said?”

“Why do you go on like this, dear?” asked Mr. Moffatt, trying to be patient. He paused in the operation of thrusting his knife across a potato.

“You *will* send it, then, will you?”

. . . Crossing the channel, he was thinking. Landing at Dover. . . .

“It's not such a simple matter as you think, Florence,” he said. “It's all very well to talk about sending it to London, and getting somebody to look after your interests, and all the rest of it. But with a picture like this which might be worth as much as fifty or sixty thousand pounds—I'm just saying it *might* be worth that—you've got to be careful. That's only ordinary common-sense.”

“Oh, I'm not saying——”

“You're putting a great deal of trust in anybody you get to deal with the picture. If the man kept back a few thousands, what about that? Eh?”

He put a piece of potato in his mouth.

“Well,” said Mrs. Moffatt, “I don't suppose it can ever be so satisfactory as looking after the picture yourself. But it's quite out of the question for *you* to go to England. You haven't the money. So you have to do the next best thing.”

Impatiently he masticated peas.

. . . That's right, he was thinking. Impossible. Impossible. Everything's impossible. . . .

“Sir Wilbur Canes said he'd give you names and addresses of friends of his in London,” went on Mrs. Moffatt. “You could trust any friends of his.”

“It's not *altogether* a matter of trusting people,” returned Mr. Moffatt.

“Well, what is it?”

“Oh, you can't go asking people to do this and that and the other thing for you when you don't personally know them.”

“I'm sure Sir Wilbur Canes would write to them himself. And I'm sure

they wouldn't mind helping you, if he asked them.”

“But I'm not so sure.”

He chewed more meat.

“If it was only a matter of trusting people to pay you the money,” put in Naomi, “you could send the picture to be examined, and if it was thought to be genuine, you could go to England—we could all go—and you could sell it yourself.”

“Yes, John,” agreed Mrs. Moffatt. “That would be the best thing.”

. . . Delay, his mind was suggesting to him. Waiting about. Months of uncertainty. Working on here, day after day. Long hours. . . .

“Oh, I don't know about that,” he said. “The thing is that you really can't ask people to go to a lot of trouble for you. No, I'm against that kind of thing. You must do all your business yourself.”

“What do you consider you can do?” asked Mrs. Moffatt.

“I've already said, I don't know.”

“You'll have to do something,” said Mrs. Moffatt, drawing a deep breath and continuing with her meal.

. . . No, I'm *not* going to send the picture by itself, he was thinking. He could see himself entering the train for Bridgnorth; see the train moving out of Paddington; English fields passing the carriage window. . . .

“If you wanted to go just for the sake of the trip,” Mrs. Moffatt added, “that would be a different matter.”

He pushed potato about in gravy.

“Oh, the trip!” he said. “It isn't a matter of the trip.”

“Of course,” mused Mrs. Moffatt, “it would be very nice for you. I'm sure a long voyage would do you good. You'd see London again. And I expect you'd have time to run up to Bridgnorth.”

He chewed potato and mashed peas.

“I'm not thinking of the trip to England at all,” he said. “I just want to do the best thing. The best thing for all of us.”

“Well, you do whatever you think is best, dear.”

She put her last piece of crackling into her mouth. Naomi swallowed her remaining portion of rissole. Mr. Moffatt plastered mustard and stuffing on his last triangle of pork. He chewed it for a while.

“It's not absolutely impossible,” he said, at length, “to get money for the fare to England.”

“How do you mean?” Mrs. Moffatt inquired, raising her serviette to her lips.

His head was throbbing again. He paused to swallow his pork before he explained.

“The—well, the bank would lend me the money.”

“Mmmmmm?”

“It wouldn't be much.”

“*Wouldn't* it?”

“I could borrow, say, three hundred. But I probably wouldn't spend all that.”

“Mmmmmm?”

. . . Why not just send the picture? his mind was saying to him. Avoid this borrowing. . . .

“I'd have no difficulty in getting it,” he pursued. “I'm sure of that. It'd be quite an easy matter.”

. . . I know, he was reflecting. She thinks I shouldn't borrow money. Why can't you do as Naomi suggests? No, no, no! . . . He could see himself stepping off the train at Bridgnorth station; walking into the town; up the High Street. He could see the old row of shops. . . .

“I wouldn't get much pleasure out of going alone,” he went on, as Mrs. Moffatt offered no comment. “If I could, I'd certainly take you— and Naomi, too, if she'd come.”

“Don't worry about that!” exclaimed Naomi. “I'd come!”

“Oh, I know that, dear,” said Mrs. Moffatt. She took Naomi's empty plate and put it on her own. “I know it isn't possible for us all to go. Anyhow if you were to go it wouldn't be just for pleasure.”

He put his knife and fork together on his plate, and touched his lips and the ends of his moustache with his serviette.

“Oh, no,” he said.

He passed his empty plate to Mrs. Moffatt, who put it with the others and carried all three to the dinner waggon in the corner. From the top of the waggon she took a glass dish containing fruit salad, a pile of three plates, and a jug of cream.

“Fruit salad!” exclaimed Mr. Moffatt.

“Yes, your favourite!” Mrs. Moffatt confirmed, and set the dish and the plates and the jug in front of her.

“I was thinking about fruit salad this morning,” he announced.

He felt a keen appetite for fruit salad.

Mrs. Moffatt began to spoon fruit salad from the dish on to the top plate.

“You don't really mean that you're going home to England, are you, John?” she asked. “I can't believe it.”

“I can believe it myself,” answered Mr. Moffatt. “But it's the only thing I can see that should be done.”

“You'll be away for months!” exclaimed Naomi.

He smiled. In his mind he was walking up the gangway on to a big ocean liner.

“You won't miss me, will you?” he asked, taking his plate of fruit salad and cream from Mrs. Moffatt by way of Naomi.

“I'll miss you,” said Mrs. Moffatt.

. . . Actually going to England, his thoughts were going on. No. Yes, you are. No. Yes. England. London. Bridgnorth. High Street. . . .

“I won't be away a day longer than I can help,” he said. “You can depend on that.”

“And if the picture is a real old master and you sell it for a few thousand pounds,” said Naomi, reddening, and talking quickly, “you can cable us and we'll come to England too.”

Mr. Moffatt's head was going throb!—throb! —throb!

Mrs. Moffatt let her spoon rest in the depths of the fruit salad.

“Oh, Naomi,” she pleaded, “don't start saying things like that. You'll be having us all too excited for anything.”

Mr. Moffatt continued to smile as he distributed sugar over his fruit salad and cream.

He could see himself in a cable office. “Sold picture to-day. Ninety thousand pounds. Book first-class passages immediately.” . . .

“I'd be very disappointed if father didn't send for us,” said Naomi, “if he suddenly got rich.”

“Rich!” exclaimed Mrs. Moffatt, resuming her discharge of the fruit salad out of its dish. “Us rich! Just fancy! You've set me imagining all kinds of things!”

“We could do a lot with twenty or thirty thousand pounds,” Mr. Moffatt encouraged.

“Thirty thousand! I should think so!” agreed Naomi, and accepted her fruit salad from Mrs. Moffatt.

Mr. Moffatt began to eat fruit salad.

. . . Motor-car, his mind was proceeding. Independent means. Leisure. Reading. Travelling round the world. . . .

“You could give me enough money to begin a new school,” said Naomi, enthusiastically. “An entirely new building, just as I want it. Then I could do things as I've wanted to do them for ages.”

“I think we'd build a new house,” Mrs. Moffatt took up the story. “Electric light all through. Electric fittings everywhere. Labour-saving arrangements. Lovely big grounds. Lawns.”

“And a tennis court,” put in Naomi.

“And a long drive up to the house,” suggested Mr. Moffatt, chewing fruit salad, and preparing to put more into his mouth.

“But we'll be in England first,” reminded Mrs. Moffatt. “We're going to join you, John.”

“Of course,” assented Mr. Moffatt.

“Then we can travel all over Europe,” said Naomi, “and I can visit all the new schools, and see what new ideas there are among teachers.”

“France—Germany—Austria—Italy—eh?”

“And then to some of the Balkan States. Oh, I'd love to travel all over there!” exclaimed Naomi.

“And India—China—Japan——”

“Oh, John!” declared Mrs. Moffatt. “You'll make us giddy!”

He was thinking:

. . . I can't remember when Naomi has spoken so frankly with me. Wonder are we going to be closer to each other now? . . .

Chapter Three

I. In the Mirror

Shortly after seven o'clock on a Thursday morning five weeks later, Mr. Moffatt looked at his face in the mirror that hung against the bathroom wall beside the bathroom window.

He was clad in a suit of faded pink pyjamas, and with a shaving brush held in his right hand he was brushing warm water from the porcelain washbasin beside him over his facial bristles.

Brushshshshsh!—brushshshshsh!—brushshshshsh!

On his left the enamelled iron bath, at one end of which the copper hot-water geyser, polished brass pipes feeding different parts of it, its polished brass spout projecting over the bath. Between the geyser and Mr. Moffatt, the green glass tooth brush tidy and the incandescent gas lamp.

He turned from the mirror, and looked through the lace curtain in front of the window out at the advertisements painted on the wall of the grocer's on the other side of the street, as he took up a tube of shaving cream from the window sill and screwed the cap off it.

In white on a blue ground: "If you Try it, you'll Buy it—R. S. Tea." And in crimson letters against a sea of yellow: "Donkey Brand Won't Wash You—Scrub the Floor with It."

He squeezed a globule of pale green shaving cream on to his wet brush, turned again to the mirror, and worked the soap over his bristled cheeks and chin. As he watched his appearance grow white and frothy, he was thinking:

. . . Don't know why my heart keeps thumping. I'm not excited. Oh, don't be silly. Tooth brush and tooth paste. Must leave them out when I've used them and remember to take them into my bedroom. Razor, too, and this brush, and the shaving cream. Great Scott! Nearly forgetting all about the strop. Take it down now, so that I'll see it. . . .

He moved away from the mirror to where his razor strop hung on the doorpost, lifted the strop off its hook, and laid it beside the tube of shaving cream on the window sill. Still developing the lather on his face, he returned to the mirror.

. . . Very first thing when I get downstairs, I must telephone for that taxi. Perhaps I'd better tell the chap quarter past ten. If he's quarter of an hour late, then, it won't matter. He may be delayed or something. Your hand's actually shaking. I don't think it is. I'm really quite calm. What did Florence say before we got up? "You don't seem in the least excited."

Come along, now, I'm not going to be all quivering and quaking and not able to speak steadily at breakfast. . . .

He stood his brush on the window sill and began to rub the lather into his bristles with his finger-tips.

. . . At one o'clock you'll be having lunch on board the *Orata*. R.M.S. *Orata*. Twenty-one thousand tons gross. The *Orata*. Rub the lather well in. Get the hairs quite softened. This must be a good shave. Passengers will get their first impression of you from your appearance after this shave. Hope old Kensal will be here in good time. Might be a lot of things he wants me to show him in the shop. Seemed very confident yesterday that he could manage while I was away. Oh, I won't need my evening suit. Yes, I know. But if I send for Florence and Naomi and we're going to theatres and things in London, it'll be because I can afford to buy new evening clothes altogether. Dressing gown's too bulky for the suit case really. Think I'll take it out and try it in the Gladstone. . . .

He turned to the window sill and took his soapy brush again.

. . . If you try it, you'll buy it—R. S. Tea. Say if Kensal is late—misses his train, or something ——! If it's half-past nine and he hasn't come. Quarter to ten and no sign of him. Ten o'clock. Quarter past—half past—! . . .

He swallowed and felt hot in his cheeks as he continued to brush lather around his face.

. . . Oh, he'll be here right enough. Must remember to tell him about Mrs. Pennington's pills. Did I put salicylic acid in the order book? I meant to. Think I noticed that stock of medium Waxo Food was getting low. The *Orata*. "All aboard, please! All aboard!" "Yes, I'll write!" "Get that gangway farther back!" Those two suits and the one I'll be wearing. Oh, ample! Wish Florence wouldn't get those pains so often. No, they don't last long. I'm sure they're just wind. But I don't like her to be in pain like that. . . .

He returned to the window, set down his foaming brush, took up his nickel-plated safety razor, faced the mirror again, and began with care to draw the blade down his cheek.

. . . Donkey Soap won't wash you—scrub the floor with it. Where did I put that passport? Where the dickens——? Oh, yes, in the pocket of the coat I'm going to wear. "Perfectly in order," that man said in the office. Suppose there's no chance of his not having noticed something that hadn't been done. "No, I'm afraid we can't let you on board with that passport. Very sorry. No, it won't do. You can't come aboard this ship, I tell you. Get away!" Oh, rubbish! I put in everything they said in that sheet of instructions. . . .

He shook the razor through the water in the wash basin at his side, freed it of a cloud of lather and bristle, and began to draw the blade carefully down his other cheek.

. . . Say if that taxi-driver can't take you to the wharf this morning? He might have another engagement. You're cutting it pretty fine leaving it till this morning to 'phone him. He might have half-a-dozen engagements round about ten o'clock. You should have booked him last night. But then something might have happened to make him forget about it. My idea was that if I left it till this morning he couldn't possibly forget. I didn't think about his being engaged beforehand. Damn it, I don't know another taxi-driver near at hand. Oh, if he can't come himself he'll tell me of somebody else. But if he won't——! Oh, shut up! I'll do something, right enough. Go in the tram if necessary. Not with your luggage! Oh, botheration take this damned razor! I stropped it enough, too. Oh, I'll tell the girl at the exchange to put me on to a taxi company in the city if this confounded man can't call.

. . .

He sighed, shook off more lather and bristles into the wash basin, and started to shave round the point of his chin.

. . . Say he's here at twenty past ten. That's allowing him to be five minutes late. Five minutes ought to be ample time to pack in the luggage and allow for little delays here and there. Florence will be darting back and forward before she's quite ready. Anyway, to be sure about it, say we get away at half past. Oh, blow it all, he ought to be able to get down to the wharf in quarter of an hour. I don't know. Perhaps not. May be held up somewhere. Say there was an accident—oh, rubbish! Breakdown—puncture—oh, these motor-cars are pretty reliable nowadays. Oh, we'll get there all right. Say he takes twenty minutes, even twenty-five minutes, we'll still be there before eleven o'clock. Then your luggage has to be carried up the wharf, and there might be a shortage of porters. Might be ten minutes' delay before you're actually at the gangway. . . .

His heart was thumping afresh as he shook more lather from the razor into the water beside him before he took the brush and began to work another lather over his face.

. . . “All second-class passengers to be on board by eleven o'clock.” Oh, I know. Better tell that fellow to call for us at ten o'clock. But then everything might go off all right, he might get you down at the wharf by quarter past ten, and the boat doesn't actually sail until noon. You'll be an hour and three-quarters saying good-bye over and over again and waiting around with Florence, not knowing what to say to her, and she not knowing what to say to you. Oh, be bothered! Be quiet! I'll tell him to call at quarter past ten—without fail. I'll tell him it's important. . . .

He leaned over to the window, exchanged his brush for his razor again, then watched himself in the mirror start to shave upwards from his neck.

. . . Glad it's going to be a fine day. Be miserable steaming down the harbour if it were wet. If you try it you'll buy it—R. S. Tea. Three shillings a pound, that stuff. R. S. Tea. If you try it you'll buy it—R. S. Tea. If you try it you'll buy it. Try it you'll buy it. . . .

He sighed, shook lather off his razor, and began to shave up his cheek.

. . . Wonder how old Kensal's feeling this morning? Hope he's quite over the touch of biliousness he complained about yesterday. Oh, he'll be all right. He'll come right enough. No good worrying myself about things that won't ever happen. Nonsense—he'll be here. But he might be quite *unable* to come. No. He might be ill in bed. I don't think so. Oh, he'll turn up. But he might have a very bad bilious attack and be in bed for days. Hope he had the sense to take a few liver pills last night. *Surely to God* he'd have enough sense for that! He might not. He might think he'd be all right, and be very ill this morning. . . .

He shook lather off his razor and started to shave up the other cheek.

. . . Kensal is not like a young man. Any one of a dozen things might prevent his coming this morning. No, I have a feeling that he'll get here. But if he——! Well, if he doesn't come, I simply can't leave by the *Orata*, and that's the end of it. I'd hardly have time to get the Drug Company to send me a man. Bothering nuisance it would be. Have to cancel the passage, that's all. Nothing else for it. . . .

He felt despondent as he began to shave up his chin.

. . . Even if you did cancel your berth on the steamer, you'd lose ten per cent of the fare. Anyway, it'd be too late to prevent the picture being carried to London by the *Orata*. . . .

He felt hot in his face again as he turned to the wash basin, sluiced the razor, and started to wipe it clean and dry on a towel.

. . . Donkey Brand won't wash you—scrub the floor with it. Well, I simply can't help it, that's all. Now don't forget this razor—and the shaving cream and the shaving brush. Oh, and the strop. Put them all together. . . .

He did so; then threw the towel on the chair in the corner, reached over to the tooth-brush tidy, took his tooth brush, filled a glass with water, unscrewed the cap from his tube of tooth paste, squeezed a ribbon of paste along the brush, and, leaning over the wash basin, began to scrub his teeth.

. . . Seven per cent. Oh, I know it's a big rate to have to pay. But it's the interest charged everywhere now for loans. Bank's as good as any other place. Seven hundred pounds you owe them now. Oh, I don't feel that I shouldn't have borrowed this three hundred. Any man in my position would have done the same. I'd be all kinds of a fool if I didn't take this

picture home, after what's been said about it. I can hardly see how I can fail to get back the three hundred on it. At the very least I'll not lose. Oh, I haven't the slightest fear of losing anything in the end. . . .

He felt happier as he finished brushing his teeth, threw the water from the glass into the wash basin, jerked out the plug of the basin, let the soapy contents drain gurgling away, and wiped his tooth brush on the towel.

. . . Must *not* forget this tooth brush. Or the paste. . . .

He put both with the shaving implements on the window sill.

. . . If you try it you'll buy it—R. S. Tea. If you try it, you'll buy it. Try it you'll buy it. . . .

He began to hiss the refrain of “I want to go to Bye-Byes,” while he unbuttoned his pyjama coat, pulled it off, and threw it over the back of the chair.

“Hiss, iss, iss, iss, iss. Hiss, iss——”

“To rest my weary head——” he muttered. “Tum tum tum, the tum, tum, the tum tum tum tum——”

He moved to the bath, turned on the cold water, took the cake of blue soap from its dish, and began to wash his hands.

“—And off I'll go right up to bed!—bang bang! Ter-a-ra, ter-a-ra, ter-a-a-a!”

. . . Yes, I know it must be hard for Florence. She doesn't say a word about it, but I know she must be longing to come with me. Well, blow it all, I wouldn't hesitate to take her if I could. Dear old girl! Oh no, it couldn't be satisfactory just sending the picture and getting scraps of information months later about it. Oh, it'd be deadly. In the end I'd probably go and deal with it myself. Might just as well go now. Of *course*, the whole thing's uncertain. Everything's uncertain. If these pains she has sometimes were severe, I'd insist on her seeing a doctor. Of course, she won't go to one unless she's compelled to. . . .

He washed the lather off his hands, took the cake of soap again, rubbed up another lather from it, squeezed the cake through his lathery fingers back to its dish, and began to wash his face, his ears, and his neck.

. . . These blessed pains. They're a nuisance. You never know. You can never be certain about them. Oh, I haven't any fears about Florence: her pains aren't that bad. Of course we're short of money, and she wants to save a doctor's fee as long as there's nothing to be alarmed about. Poor Florence! Well, aren't I going second-class because we're short of money? It's not that I *want* to go second-class. Oh, wait until I get to London with this picture! “Yes, sold the damned thing for no less than sixty-five thousand pounds! Did you ever hear anything like it? No, Moffatt didn't seem surprised. He said he'd had a feeling all along that he was about to receive

a lot of money. He'd had that feeling for years. He could always picture himself rather wealthy. He could never see where all the money was coming from to make him rich, but in the end, you see, it came to him right enough! It's extraordinary the way things work round, isn't it?" The very day I hear that the picture's a genuine old master, I'll cable to Florence to come at once. If it's an old master, it'll be worth some thousands, right enough. Doesn't matter how many thousands. The thing is, we'll be rich!..

He had washed the soap off his face and neck and ears, had untied the white, tasselled cord round his pink pyjama trousers, slipped the trousers off, threw them over the coat on the back of the chair, and now stepped into the bath, drew the white sheet across the rail at the side of it, and turned on the shower. . . .

II. Taxi

His leather cabin trunk, with an edge on the floor, leaning against the front seat, next to the driver. His suit case and his Gladstone bag at his feet on the floor of the tonneau. Mrs. Moffatt sitting beside him. The morning's newspaper, yet unopened, held in his hand across his lap.

The taxi was an ordinary open touring car with only a special registration number and a taxi-meter to distinguish it from a private vehicle.

He looked at his watch as the car started.

. . . Just half past ten, he reflected. Barely have time. Wish we could have got away earlier. The beggar was here with his car at ten past ten. Shouldn't have let old Kensal keep me talking so long. Florence wasn't ready on time, either. Like this cool breeze in my face. I'm fond of motoring. The old shop, eh! Huh! Wonder what I'll be feeling when I see it again. You'll never have to serve behind that counter again. Oh, I'm not going to say that. I'm prepared for anything. This morning marks your retirement from business. You're going to have leisure and wealth from now on. Bother it, I knew I'd forgotten something, talking to that old Kensal. I didn't put medium Waxo Food in the order book. . . .

"I hope the dining-room clock isn't slow, John," remarked Mrs. Moffatt, as the car sped along over the tramway lines towards town. "It said half past ten when I looked at it before I came out. Doesn't give you much time, does it?"

"Oh, I'll be all right," answered Mr. Moffatt. "Don't worry."

He felt irritated.

. . . "All second-saloon passengers to be on board by eleven o'clock," his mind went on. Just imagine getting this far—in the taxi and everything—and then to arrive too late at the wharf just because old Kensal kept me

talking——! Oh, we'll get there in time. We'll do it all right. . . .

"It isn't as if you just had to get into town," Mrs. Moffatt pursued. "You have to get right round to the end of Circular Quay."

. . . Well, no use talking about it, he reflected impatiently. Won't get there any sooner. Oh, damn the time. . . .

"We'll get there soon enough," he soothed, and patted Mrs. Moffatt's white-gloved hand.

"I wouldn't like you to miss the boat, that's all," Mrs. Moffatt explained.

. . . Don't suppose you would, his mind proceeded. Don't want to myself. Haven't looked at this newspaper yet. Should have looked to see anything new advertised about the *Orata*. . . .

He lifted the paper from his lap. The shipping advertisements were on the front page.

. . . Shipping—shipping—shipping. Burns Philip—P. and O.—Interstate—Comm—here we are—*Orata*, twenty-one thousand tons, so and so commander, sailing from Circular Quay noon this day and so on. Second-saloon passengers to be on board by eleven-fifteen. *What's* this? Yes, eleven-fifteen. Oh—fancy! . . .

"Eleven-*fifteen!*" he exclaimed, as he held the paper up to Mrs. Moffatt's scrutiny and pressed his forefinger against the printed line he wished her to see.

"Eleven-fifteen?" she repeated, looking at him instead of at the print.

"Passengers to be on board by eleven-fifteen—not eleven o'clock. Oceans of time," he said. He felt very happy. A burden had been lifted from him.

"Oh, that *is* a good thing," declared Mrs. Moffatt.

He began to hiss "The Merry Widow" waltz.

"Hiss—iss iss iss—Hiss—iss iss iss—hissss—hissss—hissss——"

. . . Couldn't have had a better day, he reflected as the taxi purred along the street, past houses and people and vehicles. It'll be beautiful on the harbour. Oh, I think Kensal will manage all right. Bit strange at first, naturally. But—oh, he'll get on all right. Tooth brush, paste, shaving brush, cream, razor, yes, and the strop. I put them all in. Hair brush and comb. *Did I?* Don't remember—where was it I——? Oh, yes, didn't I put them in when I packed the collars! He's a splendid driver, this young fellow. This is just a taste of the motoring you'll do when you come back. Ah now, none of this undue optimism. . . .

"What did you say, dear?" he asked Mrs. Moffatt.

"I see Mr. Brick has a display of Eezy-Kwick Shaving Stick in his window," she said.

He turned quickly to see the Bagley Junction chemist's window, caught a

brief glimpse of a lathered male face in it, and, as the car sped on, turned back to Mrs. Moffatt.

“Yes—yes,” he said.

. . . Old Brick, eh! Wonder did he hear I was going away. “Yes, we heard about your good fortune, Moffatt. I was never so surprised in my life. I wish I had half your luck.” “Oh well, I don't know, Brick, old fellow. Your turn will come. Oh, yes, yes, didn't you hear? Yes, I sold the shop for four thousand five hundred. Yes, money seems to be pouring in to me from all sides.” Oh rubbish. Bother it, and I didn't put down salicylic acid in the order book. Tell Florence. No, she'll forget, or put down the wrong thing. There's old Mr. Accrington. Walking to the tram-stop to go to town, I suppose. He's not looking this way. No, he never noticed me. And that's Miss Pennington. . . .

“Oh, how d'you do!” he muttered, as Miss Pennington smiled at him from the pavement and he raised his hat.

“Miss Pennington,” he explained in answer to Mrs. Moffatt's look of inquiry. “Since they moved to Bagley Junction from Six Ways Cross, her mother's continued to get all her medicine from me, though she lives only a few doors from Mr. Brick, and the Blue Band Pharmacy is just down the street as well.”

. . . Would she have noticed the luggage in front? his mind went on. Wonder would she realise I was going to England? “Oh, mother, I saw Mr. Moffatt going off somewhere in a taxi.” “Why, didn't you know, dear? He's taking a trip home to England. *Oh, yes!*” There's no need for you to be polite to these people if you don't want to be. You can be independent of them now. You'll never be behind that counter again. Oh, I don't know. Just as well to keep hold of the customers. Get a better price for the business in the end. . . .

“I suppose that time in the paper wouldn't be a misprint, would it?” Mrs. Moffatt questioned, as they travelled past the shops of Bagley Junction.

“Eleven-fifteen, you mean?”

“Yes. You don't think it would be, do you?”

“Oh no, no!” he assured her, though his heart began to beat more rapidly.

. . . Botheration take the time! his thoughts continued. . . .

He looked at his watch.

. . . Nearly quarter to eleven. My God, my God! perhaps we'll never do it! Oh, yes, we shall. Great Scott! . . .

“What's the time, dear?” asked Mrs. Moffatt.

“Oh, nearly quarter to eleven,” he answered, frowning, and drummed his fingers impatiently on the newspaper.

“I think I'd better ask the driver to hurry,” suggested Mrs. Moffatt, “or

you'll never be there in time if the paper is wrong.”

Mr. Moffatt was feeling excited, but made no comment. Mrs. Moffatt leaned forward to the driver and spoke in his ear. He nodded, and the car went faster. Mrs. Moffatt sat back in her seat and nodded her head significantly at Mr. Moffatt. Mr. Moffatt swallowed something in his throat and gazed at the succession of houses, shops, and advertisement hoardings flashing by.

. . . Go on, faster, faster, went on his mind. Drive as fast as you like. Just too late. Just missed the boat by a few minutes. Oh, nonsense. I'll catch it. Go on, man, shake things up! . . .

“It'd be awful if you missed it, John,” deplored Mrs. Moffatt.

Mr. Moffatt did not answer.

. . . Oh, it'd be too ridiculous to miss the boat, his thoughts flowed on. I'll get on board somehow. That old Kensal! He seems impatient with customers. I didn't like the way he spoke to that girl who came in while I was there. People will go to Menningham's shop if Kensal is curt to them. Of course Menningham has a bad reputation. He's been seen drunk and people won't trust him with prescriptions. But if Kensal is so unpleasant, people will go to Brick or somebody at Bagley Junction for their prescriptions. They can always go to Menningham for patent medicines, and things of that sort. Oh, I know it'll be a miracle if I come back and don't find half my regular customers trading elsewhere. Well, Kensal was the only man I could get at a reasonable salary. The old chap's so nervous all the time in case anything should go wrong. He'd get on any customer's nerves. He'll do the business absolutely no good. I might as well face that fact. If he were to make a mistake in dispensing a prescription through being so nervous, it would cause no end of trouble. I believe he's quite capable of doing something foolish if he gets flurried. Tch, tch! But how did I know what he was like when I engaged him? Ah dear! Getting on for ten to eleven, and we're only through the park. “All aboard, please! All aboard!” Oh, botheration take it! . . .

“You know, John,” remarked Mrs. Moffatt, as the car purred out of the park and into the public street again, “I can't believe that the time given in the paper would be wrong.”

“Eleven-fifteen, you mean?”

“Yes. I'm sure a mistake of that kind would never be made.”

“Oh, I don't myself think it's wrong,” said Mr. Moffatt, smiling. “You haven't been thinking I'd really miss the boat, have you?”

“Oh well, I suppose you won't miss it, if it doesn't actually sail until noon. I just want you to be there by the time they say.”

“Always worrying about me, aren't you?” he observed good-naturedly,

and patted her gloved hand again.

She smiled up at him.

. . . Beautiful sunshine, beautiful fresh air, he went on thinking. Glorious day. No, that would hardly be a misprint in the paper. Oh, I've got loads of time. Poor old Kensal, eh! Wonder if he'll be very busy this morning. I hope for his own sake that he won't be. Oh, I dare say he'll be all right when he gets settled down. Being strange to the shop, and not being able to find things readily would make him a bit irritable perhaps at first. But I don't doubt he'll get over that and be well liked by everybody. I'm sure his manner could be very pleasant. I dare say this morning he wasn't feeling in the best of health. When he's quite over this bilious turn, he'll be as good a man as I could have got. Ah, things will be all right. . . .

It was a few minutes after eleven o'clock when the taxi drew up among many others outside the *Orata's* berth at Circular Quay. Willing hands removed his luggage, put it on a truck, and wheeled it with much rumbling and bumping through the gates and the big shed to the crowded wharf. He was feeling very excited as he paid the taxi driver and managed to look at the figure on the meter without appearing to do so in order that he should not be overcharged. With Mrs. Moffatt he followed in the track of his luggage, and while the porter carried it up the gangway marked "second saloon" to the deck, he waited at the foot of the gangway for himself and his passport and his ticket to be sharply scrutinised by a group of officials. They seemed very small beside the huge black hull of the *Orata*, her great white superstructure, and her towering, gently-smoking, yellow funnels. At length his passport was returned to him, and he could go on board.

"I'll come back here to you in a few minutes," he promised Mrs. Moffatt.

. . . Knew all along there'd be no hitch, he reflected as he scrambled up the difficult, sloping gangway. Everything right as rain. Plenty of time. Second-class gangway. Oh, I know. Yes, there's the first saloon gangway up there. Oh, I don't mind going second-class. Might be very different a few months hence. Somewhere in this big ship there's the picture. Stowed in one of the holds. Oh, it's on board all right. The *Orata*. Actually *leaving for England—with this picture. England! I am!* The *Orata*. Twenty-one thousand tons gross. My word, she looks a fine ship. Red Sea, Suez Canal, Mediterranean, Gibraltar. . . .

A sailor, an officer, a group of white-coated stewards, and various restless passengers on the deck at the head of the gangway. The spotless, scrubbed planks of the deck, thin lines of pitch between them. The white, white wall of the superstructure, with the square windows of the deck cabins. His cabin trunk, his suit case, and his Gladstone piled in front of one of the stewards.

“Mr. Moffatt, sir?” inquired that one.

“Er—yes,” said Mr. Moffatt, and felt important.

. . . How did they know? his mind asked. . . .

“This way, sir, if you please,” said the steward, seized the Gladstone and the suit case, and walked over the shiny high brass step into the ship.

Mr. Moffatt, his heart beating very fast, followed him.

. . . Very efficient, these stewards, he reflected, as he crossed the brass step and pursued the agile, white-clothed figure down a wide stairway on which numerous people were ascending and descending. This is my steward for the voyage. This is the man I'll be tipping when we reach Tilbury. London! St. Paul's. The Bank. Westminster. Thames. London! . . .

He was being shown his cabin—a four-berth cabin, but only two others besides himself to occupy it. . . .

While he threaded his way between people as he re-ascended the stairs, crossed the deck, and walked down the gangway again to the wharf, he was thinking:

. . . Not going to see Florence again for four or five months. I can't realise it. Yes, out of your life completely—Florence. And Naomi. Wish Naomi were here. I know her work at school is too important to leave. But I just feel I want to hug her before I go. Doesn't matter. Too late now. Such a peck of a kiss she gave me this morning after breakfast when she went away. No, I don't want her to leave her school work to see me off. Bother this going away, this parting. Why need there be all this wretched feeling? Oh, I'm all right. But the whole thing is awful. I've got to kiss Florence good-bye now. Oh, *damn* this business! If Florence has tears in her eyes—! If she can't speak——! She's trying to be brave, I know. And I know she's going to break down when the boat starts to move. It's just cruel. But I can't help it. Wish it was over, that's all. If Naomi were here I wouldn't mind one scrap. But Florence is going to be crying on the wharf, and I'm going to be on the ship moving farther and farther away and just having to watch her. Then she'll feel wretchedly miserable all alone, and have to go back to an empty house except for old Kensal. Confound Naomi! Oh, I don't mean that. . . .

Among the crowds of people on the wharf, it was difficult to find Mrs. Moffatt again. At length he reached her side. But then there were sharp cries of “Passengers aboard, please! All passengers aboard!” . . .

Chapter Four

I. His Return

Four months later, and the R.M.S. *Montane* from London *via* ports was being urged by tug-boats and hawsers into her berth at Circular Quay, Sydney, late on a cloudy, chill, windy morning in July.

Mr. Moffatt had on his overcoat as he leaned against the taffrail of the second-saloon deck at the stern of the R.M.S. *Montane*. He was looking at the area of wharf below him, vacant but for Customs officers, and men helping the *Montane*—looking proud with her three black funnels smoking—to come to rest.

. . . Marvellous, he was thinking, the way they handle these great ships. Florence. Too much pressure would send her crash against the wharf, and something would give way. Florence. But they bring her just gently up within a few inches of it. Florence. I thought they might have let people on to the wharf—thought I might have seen Florence from the deck. But I forgot the Customs. Florence. She's waiting outside the wharf, I suppose. I don't feel in the least excited now. I did first thing this morning, when we were coming up the coast. But now that we're at the wharf and I'll see her in ten minutes or so, I'm calm. Am I really glad to be seeing her again? Honestly, now! If you were really looking forward to seeing her, you wouldn't be so composed as this. Oh, rot! The old Sydney trams, eh! What a dickens of a noise they make. Noisiest trams in the world. There's nothing I left out of my trunks, is there? No, I packed everything. Steward said he'd have all my luggage carried on to the wharf. The old post-office tower, eh! And that's the Lands building. Hallo, the Manly ferry. Seems years since I saw a Manly ferry boat. Florence. Feels much longer than four months since I went away. Oh, I'm just as glad to be back. Wonder can Florence see me? Perhaps she's one of that crowd of people outside the gates over there. Don't seem able to recognise her. Suppose she's as excited as a school-girl. Plenty of activity along the first-saloon deck. Wonder will they have the first-saloon gangway down before ours? Lot of fooling around down there on the wharf. Looks as if the ship's berthed all right. What's the delay? Oh, yes, I'll get a taxi home. Florence will like it. Wonder if Naomi is here to meet me. Hope so, for Florence's sake. Oh, I hope Florence is not upsetting herself, getting herself all worked up. Dear Florence. Oh, I'm glad to be back in Sydney. I'll be as happy as a sand boy when I'm in the old shop again. Wonder has Claverley changed much? Suppose that picture theatre will be finished by now. Must see it. Wonder

what young Mr. and Mrs. Earlstone over there think of their first glimpse of Sydney. Makes me think of the first time I landed at Sydney myself. Oh, Sydney's altered out of recognition since then. Wish the weather wasn't so gloomy. Wind's jolly cold. Beautiful day it was when I went away. Four months ago it is since I left; and here I am back again. Wonder is Florence disappointed about it all? Of course, she won't say so. I know that. Quite resigned myself. Don't feel in the least disturbed about it. There, they're fixing that first-class gangway. They'll have the second-class gangway rigged up soon. Well, I'll be off the old *Montane* in a matter of minutes. Suppose before another hour's gone I'll be back at the shop. It'll be lunch time when we get home. I'll be ready for some lunch. How funny, back in the old dining room again, having lunch. Suppose Florence will have something nice for me. Wouldn't mind sausages. And gravy. Mashed potato. Old Kensal can stay on in the shop and finish to-night. I'll begin again to-morrow morning. It'll seem strange behind the counter after all this travelling. This afternoon I'll go for a walk with Florence. Might go down to the beach. We can talk about things there. Go to the pictures to-night. If she'd like to. If that new picture-show's open. Ah, well! Dear Florence. I *hope* she's not got herself too excited. If Naomi's with her it will be all right. Wish to goodness I was off the boat and in the taxi on our way home. Oh, I don't regret having been away, Had a wonderful holiday. Feel a new man. Quite prepared to get down to work again. I'm a lucky beggar in a hundred ways. Had this trip, and enjoyed it. Disappointment's nothing. Quite used to the idea of it now. Never did really think anything but disappointment would come of it. It's all over now. I'm satisfied. Anyhow, why should I wish to retire? Been very happy at Claverley in the shop. I can be happy so long as I have Florence, and as long as we love each other. We have our home, and we can be content to be careful now until I've paid off this debt. Oh, things won't be so bad. Probably wouldn't have been a bit happier if I'd come home rolling in wealth. I don't want money. I want happiness. And with Florence, I've got that. Here they're rigging up the second-class gangway. Have I got everything? I did look round the cabin. There's that blessed bath steward just come on deck. Saw him before when I'd finished packing. I know what he wants. Oh, I feel a mean devil, but it's going to cost no end of money if I start to tip them all. I've given the cabin steward ten shillings. Yes, he thought it was mighty little. But I can't help it. Just can't afford more, that's all. Hope I don't see that dining-room steward. I know the other passengers at our table tipped him well. But why worry? Never see the man again. Never travel on this ship any more. He didn't do anything special for me. There's that blighter, too, who cleans the shoes. Saw him hanging round and trying to be very polite. Bother them!

That deck steward, too, expects something, I know. Just haven't got the money to give away. I feel as mean and grasping as a money-lender. Can't help it. You're supposed to give the bar steward in the smoke room something as well. And the barber, I suppose. Then there's the man in the lift. Well, I've ignored the lot of them. Wish I was off the boat, that's all, and away from their gloating eyes. The way they all look at you! Of course, if I thought I'd be on this boat again——! No, but there's no earthly chance of that. Oh, what do I want to feel so miserable and miserly for? Be hanged to these young men! Hallo, they've nearly got that gangway fixed. Well, it's good-bye to the old *Montane*, right enough. Fine ship. No fault to find with her. Have to go through the Customs first. Florence. Blessed heart's beginning to beat now. Don't know why it should. Wish to goodness I was off. Florence. Oh, I wonder is she changed? Four months. Oh, it's only a short time. Couldn't make much difference. Florence. Florence. There, they've fixed the gangway now. Stewards going down first with the luggage. Better watch to see mine go down. Florence. Here my heart's beating like anything. But I'm really calm. No, my hand's not trembling. Nonsense, no. How long are they going to be with this luggage? Seems no end to it. Florence. Suppose she's wondering what all the delay's about. Wonder if Naomi *is* with her. Hope that beggar hasn't forgotten my luggage. He said it'd be all right. Perhaps there's going to be some hanky-panky because I gave him only ten shillings. Oh, I hardly think so. He's a long time with my luggage, anyhow. Where is it? Florence. Oh, damn the man, why doesn't he hurry? We're going to be an eternity waiting about here; and there'll be more waiting to get through the Customs. Florence. She'll be waiting out there. Florence. No, that's not my steward—no, nor that, nor that. No, not my luggage. I'll know it when I see it. No—no. Suppose I ought to say good-bye to some of these passengers. Don't feel able to. It'll mean talking to them. I can't think of a word to say. If it had been yesterday it would have been all right. Florence. Oh, it's not because I'm excited. Florence. Tch, tch! I hope she isn't tired. Poor little girl. No, that's not mine, either. No—no. Yes, there's my steward, but he's just been carrying somebody else's luggage down. Oh, there's no need to speak to him. Don't think for a moment he's forgotten it. Florence. Wonder does anybody notice now red I am in the face? Florence. I can feel my cheeks warm. All the blood seems to have gone to my head. Florence. Not going to let myself get excited and have a headache when I arrive home. Hallo! here he is—with my luggage too. The cabin trunk, anyhow. Oh, if he's got that, he won't forget the suit case and the Gladstone. They seem nearly finished with the luggage now. We'll be able to go off in a jiffy. Florence. The old *Montane*, eh! Florence. Oh, I'm not excited. . . .

II. Florence

At last he was through with the Customs officers, and was following a porter who was rumbling his luggage on a hand truck out through the wharf gates into the street.

A crowd of people were on the pavement and overflowing on to the roadway. There was much confusion, with taxi-cabs sounding their horns and drawing up to the kerb, luggage being loaded on to them and passengers scrambling into them and being borne away up the street. Tram-cars were clanging their bells and thundering past. A few policemen were looking calm amid the crowd. There were men's voices shouting to porters or to taxi-drivers.

Mr. Moffatt's heart was thumping as he emerged from the wharf.

. . . Florence, he was thinking. Now where is she? No, not among those people. Suppose she's looking out for me. Florence. Where are you, my dear? Wonder is she waiting somewhere else? Hallo! where's that chap with my luggage? Where the dickens has he——? Oh, there he is at the kerb. Don't see Florence anywhere. Where can she be? . . .

“Want a taxi, sir?” asked the porter, pausing with his truck up-tilted and his hands resting on the ends of the shafts.

“Yes, please,” replied Mr. Moffatt. “But wait a moment. Yes, I want one. But wait. I don't know. Somebody is meeting me. But I don't see them yet.”

. . . Surely wouldn't be late, his thoughts were going on. She must be here somewhere. . . .

“Is there anywhere else that people wait to meet passengers?” he asked the man.

“No, I don't think so,” said the man. “This is where they mostly wait.”

He looked as though he wanted to be off to someone else's luggage. Mr. Moffatt began to have qualms about the size of the tip necessary if he were kept much longer.

. . . Suppose she's looking out for me somewhere, and I can't see her, he reflected. . . .

“Just leave my things here on the pavement,” he instructed, as he pulled out a shilling and gave it to the man.

Another tram clamoured past, grinding over the rails. Another taxi crept up alongside the kerb within a few feet of where he stood with his luggage, took fares on board, and with its engine accelerating, purred away again. The smell of its bluish exhaust was in his nose.

. . . Now where can she be? he was thinking, worriedly, as his porter pocketed the shilling and trundled his empty truck back to the wharf. Florence. *Florence!* Wretched to miss one another like this. She must have

come. She's waiting somewhere. I'm sure of it. But I can't leave this luggage to go and find her. Botheration! . . .

Some people, laughing and talking excitedly, bumped into him and nearly pushed him into the gutter. They apologised and he protested that it was quite all right.

. . . I can't stay here too long, his mind proceeded. Getting in people's way. I wasn't looking forward to this kind of home-coming. Oh, I don't mind. It isn't Florence's fault. Where is she? Florence! Oh, what an infernal nuisance! Damn these people! . . .

He was bumped again, and saved himself from falling only by steadying himself against his upturned cabin trunk.

“Quite all right!” he returned to the muttered “Sorry!” that proceeded from the lips of the offenders.

Another tram went past with great din. Another taxi was halting at the kerb, and passengers were climbing into it.

From his position alongside his luggage, he stretched his neck forward to peer over the heads of the bustling people for the face of Florence, Florence. Or Naomi!

. . . No, don't see them, his mind went on. No, that's not Florence. No, not a sign of her. Not a blessed sign. Oh, what a nuisance this is. Surely I'd see her if she were here. She'd be moving about looking for me. Oh, I can't leave this luggage. And I'd have to tip somebody to look after it. Oh, she's here somewhere. I'll see her in a moment. Tch, tch! What a business this is.

. . .

He sighed. His face was very hot, and his heart was still beating very fast.

More trams banged themselves by, more taxis loaded themselves with people and luggage and whisked off in front of puffs of bluish smoke from their exhausts. The people emerging from the wharf became fewer and fewer, and the pavement gradually cleared until he was one of only a small number scattered about it. Still he could not see Florence. The wind was very bleak.

. . . Well, she simply hasn't come, he concluded. Couldn't have got my letter. I'll get home and surprise her. What a joke! I'll ring at the front door and let her open it to me. . . .

He was considering for a while whether he would hire a taxi or have his luggage sent by carrier and himself proceed by tram. It cheered him to think of being able to save the price of a taxi. And the prospect of coming home to Florence as such a surprise recompensed him to some extent for his tiredness after waiting so long.

. . . Now where's a carrier? he was reflecting . . .

Then he felt the pressure of a hand on his arm, and a familiar voice saying, "Hallo, father!"

He jerked his head round, and there was Naomi, flushed, breathless, and smiling.

"Well!" he exclaimed. "*Here* you are!"

He bent impulsively to kiss her on the lips, but she turned her face and he could kiss her only on her cheek. She gave him a sharp little kiss on his own cheek—all in a moment. A kiss—and then gone. It left him unsatisfied.

"I was *just* about to go," he said excitedly. "I thought nobody could be coming to meet me."

"I'm awfully sorry," panted Naomi. Her flushed cheeks and her bright eyes made her look so full of life and health. "I meant to get here earlier. But I was at a meeting of the Service Society—a special meeting. I couldn't possibly come away. I hope I haven't kept you waiting long."

"No—no—no," he assured her, so relieved at seeing her again. He was longing to kiss her on those richly colourful lips. "Quite all right. But where's your mother?"

"Oh, I must tell you, father. Mother isn't well."

"*Oh dear!* What's the matter with her?"

"I don't think it's anything serious. But she's in a private hospital."

"Private hospital!" he repeated, and there were the words in his mind:

. . . Cancer — pneumonia — tuberculosis — limb broken — accident. . .

"What's the matter with her?" he asked again.

"She had a pain in her side," explained Naomi. "She told me she'd had it often before. But last week it was very bad, and she sent for Dr. Wynnerson."

"What did the doctor say?" urged Mr. Moffatt impatiently.

"He said there was nothing to be alarmed about, but the pain was suspicious, and he advised her to go into hospital at once. St. Margaret's Hospital in Standlick."

"Didn't he say what he was suspicious of?"

"He said he thought it might be appendicitis."

"When did she go into hospital?"

"Only yesterday afternoon. She was going to be examined this morning."

"He hadn't decided to operate?"

"No, he couldn't decide at once. He was going to say definitely after the examination this morning."

"Dear, dear! Tch, tch, tch!"

Mr. Moffatt felt hot and cold at once. The chill wind was whistling round

the wharf buildings.

. . . So this is why she wasn't here to meet me, he was reflecting. Poor little woman! . . .

“And you haven't heard any more yet?” he asked.

“No. I haven't had a chance to telephone so far. Now I'll have to rush off and have a bite of lunch. I've promised to meet a friend in town.”

“You're not at school?”

“Closed. Influenza!” she explained, smiling. “But I haven't a second to spare. I just thought I'd run round and tell you about mother. This afternoon I have to go to a lecture class.”

“Learning to lecture?”

“Oh yes!”

. . . She doesn't want to explain, his mind went on. Thought she was changing towards me before I went away. We were talking quite frankly about the money we were going to spend. But she's just like she used to be now. I must find out about Florence. . . .

“Good-bye! I must go now, father!” Naomi declared.

III. His Imagination

There was a taxi waiting against the kerb. Impulsively he walked to it as Naomi strode away.

“Want you to drive me to St. Margaret's Private Hospital, in Osborne Street, Standlick,” he said to the driver. “You know it?”

The driver raised himself from his seat against the back of which he had been lounging, nodded his head in a tired but understanding way, and opened the taxi door.

“That's my luggage,” explained Mr. Moffatt, pointing to it.

The driver nodded comprehendingly again. He left his car and loaded the luggage into it, the cabin trunk against the front seat, the suit case and the Gladstone in the tonneau.

Mr. Moffatt climbed into the tonneau and seated himself. The wind was making the back of the hood flap noisily. Several men walked out through the wharf gates. He recognised two of them as stewards. There was now only one policeman standing on the pavement. More noisy trams were passing; and motor-cars, motor-trucks, and horse lorries were coming away from the North Shore vehicle punt which had just berthed farther up the quay. There was the sound of a ferry steamer whistle. The taxi driver was clambering into his seat before the steering wheel, the starting motor was whirring, the engine was bursting into subdued life, there was a sound of gears being shifted, of the engine accelerating, and the taxi was purring

away into the traffic.

Mr. Moffatt kept his hands in his overcoat pockets out of the chill wind as he sat back in his seat watching the passing vehicles and the ugly, grey stone bondage warehouses and wool stores along the street.

He had a feeling of luxury and satisfaction as his body swayed gently and pressed against the yielding cushions and springs of the leather seat. He would have liked to enjoy this sense of satisfaction to the utmost, but his mind was busy in other directions.

. . . I'm not sure that I'm right in taking this taxi, he was thinking. The blessed expense. Wouldn't mind a bit if Florence were here with me to enjoy it. But ten or twelve shillings just for me and my luggage——! Perhaps I shouldn't have taken it. I scarcely stopped to think what I was doing. Here I'll be landed at the hospital right enough, but there's still the luggage. How am I going to get *that* home? Bothering nuisance. It will mean going to the hospital, then sending this man on just with the luggage to the shop. Goodness knows what he'll charge altogether. Fifteen shillings—seventeen and six—a pound——! Don't know. Lot of money, anyhow. And from the hospital to the shop he'll have only the luggage! . . .

He shifted uneasily in his seat as the car travelled on.

. . . Why not, at length his mind continued, get him to take you to the shop with the luggage, then dismiss him? That would save a lot of expense. Yes, I could take a tram from the shop to the hospital. Much cheaper. I feel so jolly hungry too. If I go to the hospital right away, it might be hours before I get anything to eat. Talking to Florence. I'll be famished. If I dismiss him at the shop, I can run across and have something to eat at the hotel over the road, and go to the hospital later on. I feel that hungry. . . .

He leaned forward and spoke to the taxi driver.

“Changed my mind,” he shouted. “Take me to Six Ways Cross, Claverley. You know it?”

The driver nodded.

Having arranged about his lunch, Mr. Moffatt felt more contented. In his mind he could see a plate with a rectangle of shiny, juicy brown steak, with gravy over it, crisp chipped potatoes beside it, and fresh bread on a small plate beside the big plate. In his mind, too, he could smell that steak and those potato chips and that newly-baked bread.

. . . Macquarie Street, eh! his thoughts were running on. Sydney Hospital. The Mint. Fine wide street, this. College Street. Hyde Park. Well, well! St. Mary's Cathedral. Museum. Sydney Grammar School. And here's Oxford Street. Winter sales, eh! Sales, nothing but sales. Slashing price reductions. Oh, of course. Oh, I expect Florence would be here at these sales if she were well. Appendicitis! It was those same pains she used to

complain of before I went away. She'll know to-day whether Wynnerson thinks an operation necessary. These operations! Cutting away, cutting away. Tch, tch! And you can never be absolutely sure when they operate. Oh, I know thousands of people come out all right. But there's still the uncertainty until it's over. Oh, I know, I know—appendicitis can be a very serious thing. I don't for a moment feel dejected about it—but there you are. . . .

He drew in a deep breath and exhaled it slowly and completely as he watched the familiar drapery and furniture shops and the succession of other establishments flashing past as the car sped on.

. . . No good letting myself get into the dumps, he continued to reflect. I could easily enough be depressed, what with the disappointment, and then coming home like this. And the dull weather's enough to give you the pip. Looks as if it might rain soon. Suppose the blessed shop will be in a bit of a muddle. Business will probably need a lot of pulling together again. "Who passed away at St. Margaret's Hospital, Standlick, after a short illness." Oh, ridiculous. "Yes, it was appendicitis she died from. Well, it was chiefly a matter of operating too late. She should have seen about it earlier." I wonder. I wonder. "Died from appendicitis." *Surely* not. "No, from the time he went away he never saw her alive again. She died before she was operated on." No, no, no. "He was almost out of his mind for months after. He never did recover entirely from the shock." Now what good can come from letting myself think this sort of thing? "He lived only a year after she died." . . .

He tried to read the names on the shop windows and to notice the people walking on the pavements as the car purred along the street.

. . . I'll feel better after I've had some lunch. Bogan the tailor, eh! And here's Welburn and March—they're having a new shop front. *That'll* be an improvement. Who are *these* people?—S. N. Spring, Limited, the new clothiers. Quite a nice shop it looks. But where's Enderby Robb's place? It's gone. Oh, it used to be where this new firm is. Fancy Robb's place gone. I can remember old Robb's shop for years back. Gone, eh! "She died before he could see her. Appendicitis. Ah no, neither do I like these operations." Old Robb's shop gone. "Enderby Robb, the Oxford Street chemist and druggist." I remember as well as anything the sign he used to have outside. Wonder is he dead? I'll have some apple tart and cream after the steak and chips. I think it's just because I'm hungry that I feel depressed. If Florence *did* die! . . . No, no. . . . Yes, appendicitis. She might never come out of St. Margaret's Hospital. Your last memory of Florence as you have always known her might be one you already possess of her waving good-bye to you with a handkerchief among that crowd of people on the wharf when

you went away. Years after this you might be cherishing that memory of Florence—the way she was waving to you, then the way she turned round suddenly and disappeared among the crowd of people. She was all alone among that crowd. You had left her: you were going away, quickly disappearing from view, becoming smaller and smaller as the great ship was backed into mid-stream. There was nobody to comfort her. Naomi wasn't with her. She was utterly alone. And she couldn't bear any more. And now she is going to die. . . .

He swallowed a lump in his throat as the car bore him on. He filled his lungs from the chill wind that blew in his face, and sighed.

. . . Why do I let myself go on like this? his thoughts proceeded. It's all nonsense, too. I feel as though I were surrounded by a cloud as black as pitch. I could be absolutely morbid if I allowed myself. Palace Picture Theatre, eh! What was that? Dorma Salgridge in “The Last Kiss,” I think it said. Or something like that. The last kiss. . . .

He looked at his watch. But he replaced it in his waistcoat pocket without noticing what the time was.

. . . And now, his mind went on, Florence is waiting for you. She has had your letter. She knows the *Montane* was due to berth soon after eleven o'clock. At eleven o'clock she'll have been imagining the ship coming up to the wharf at Circular Quay, then she'll have been picturing you walking down the gangway and Naomi meeting you and telling you about her. She'll be hoping you won't be terribly disappointed at not seeing her. Then she'll be thinking as she looks at the time, Now he's getting into a taxi, and now he must be on his way to the hospital. And she's expecting to see you at any moment. She's just lying in bed and waiting and waiting. And perhaps they've just told her they'll operate on her. And she's going to die. Oh, I can't go without lunch. I had breakfast so early. Palace Picture Theatre. Dorma Salgridge in “The Last Kiss.” The last kiss. What a title! The last kiss. And she's just waiting and waiting for you. If I wasn't so blessed hungry. . . .

He felt that he was very tired. He wished that he could stop thinking.

Suddenly he leaned over to the taxi driver again.

“Take me straight to St. Margaret's Hospital in Standlick, after all,” he said.

. . . The man will think I'm an ass, he reflected as he sank back against the yielding leather of the car seat. . . .

IV. St. Margaret's

It was a big house painted a light brown now much faded, and it stood

back from the quiet suburban street amid lawns and several pine trees.

While he closed the wooden gate bearing the sign, "St. Margaret's," and clicked the catch into its place, he could hear the muffled noise of his taxi as it travelled away up the street. The sound rose shrilly, died away as a gear was changed, then broke out again in a lower tone and became faint as the vehicle turned a corner. Now he could hear only the rush of the wind up the hillside on which St. Margaret's stood, the siss-ss-ss-ss! of it through the pine trees, and the scrunch-scrunch! of his shoes pressing into the pathway's gravel.

It felt a bitter wind, and he seemed exposed to its unchecked energies as he walked against it up the gravel path. The main entrance to St. Margaret's overlooked the hillside, and he had to walk round the side of the building to get to it.

As he scrunched over the gravel, he looked up at the faded brown house. It seemed to suggest a great quietness, so that he felt guilty of disturbance as he walked along the noisy gravel. Through one window he could discern the end of a white enamel bedstead. From another he noticed with a start that a woman in a nurse's uniform was observing his approach. He affected not to see her, and walked faster.

. . . Somewhere in here, Florence is, he was thinking. In a few minutes I'm going to see her. Woo-oo-oo! it's cold. . . .

Up the front steps he walked, now with the wind at his back, clack-clack-clack! over the cold-looking black and white square tiles of the wide verandah, and stood on the doormat as he pressed the porcelain button in the centre of the circular brass disc beside the door, to make known his arrival. He turned and looked over at the expanse of suburban house roofs beginning at the bottom of St. Margaret's grounds, at the tramway line threading through them towards the city, and at the spreading green of the race-course beyond the house tops. Then he rubbed his hands vigorously. He was shivering. And neither the thickness of his overcoat nor the friction of his palms seemed to warm him.

The wide door, with its decorated glass upper panels, was suddenly opened, and a girl in a white uniform revealed. He could smell iodoform.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, smiling from his position on the doormat. "Do you think I'd be allowed to see—er—Mrs.—Moffatt—just for a few minutes? I—er—I'm Mr. Moffatt."

"Would you step inside, please?" asked the girl.

He was conscious that she was very pretty.

"Er—thank you," he said.

He ceased to smile, and walked into the square, carpeted hall. His eyes noted a tall palm in each of the far corners, a passage across the back of the

hall, and rooms which opened from either side. There seemed a hush over everything. Very quietly the girl shut the front door.

“Will you sit down?” she suggested, in a subdued voice.

He smiled and nodded and sat on a leather-covered chair as she walked on tip-toe out of the hall, and disappeared round the corner of the passage.

He could see that he was actually shaking with cold now. There was a faint colour of purple on the backs of his hands. As he sat he breathed little short breaths. Everything was very quiet.

. . . Wonder is she upstairs or down? his mind was running on. Oh, I don't care what it costs her to be here, so long as she's comfortable. If I'd been with her I'd have insisted on her coming here. I don't like those public hospitals. Ah, it's all right. I'll get hold of the money. . . .

A door opposite where he sat stood open. Through it he could see a triangle of dark green carpet and one end of a green Chesterfield couch. It suggested peacefulness. From somewhere in that room he could hear very faintly the slow tock!—tock!—tock!—tock! of a big clock. It seemed to accentuate the calm. From a region along the passage there floated to him the tones of a woman's voice declaring, “Well, he hasn't sent them; that's all I can say.” There came another voice in answer, but it was incoherent to him. From the same direction he could hear the tweet-tweet! of a canary. A little later there issued the voice of somebody using a telephone. “Is that Dr. Eberley?” said the voice. “Oh, shut that door, please, nurse.” A door was quietly closed and he could hear no more.

His mind was going on:

. . . Appendicitis. “Oh, I'm so sorry, but Mrs. Moffatt is not well enough to be seen just now. Shall I give her any message?” Appendicitis. “Yes, she was operated on this morning. Would you call back this evening?” I could run over this evening if it were necessary. I'll have Kensal still at the shop. Appendicitis. Wonder what Wynnerson *did* decide about her this morning? . . .

The girl who had admitted him appeared from the passage in the hall again.

“Would you mind coming this way?” she said.

“Oh—yes—certainly!” he exclaimed, rose quickly and walked into the passage after her.

He tip-toed after the white figure past door after door. He could smell again iodoform. The girl stopped at last outside one of the doors, her hand on the knob, knocked on the panel, opened the door, and allowed him to walk inside.

It was a small room that he entered, and intensely bright after the dimness of the passage. A big window faced him, below it was a white

enamel bed—and in the bed was Mrs. Moffatt. He noticed that her cheeks looked pale as she smiled at him from the whiteness of the pillow.

“John!” she exclaimed softly as he advanced towards her over the carpet, and the girl shut the door behind him.

“Well—my dear!—what a place to find you!” he answered, though in his mind there were the words:

. . . What has the doctor decided to do about her? . . .

He had dropped his hat on an armchair, and he held out his arms as he came to her, put them affectionately round her shoulders and bent down and kissed her. He kissed her again and again, and when he had done kissing her, he stood up and pretended to be surveying the little room, for there were tears in his eyes now, and he was blinking his eyelids in an attempt to clear the tears away.

“Splendid little room you've got here,” he said, with an effort of will, but he was thinking:

. . . Oh, don't be a fool—weeping! Great Scott! Oh, I don't know what the devil these tears are for. I don't feel worked up about anything. Not going to let her see me like this, anyway. Lot of rot it is. *Me* tearful! . . .

And as he looked round at the fireplace with the gas-fire alight in it, and at the little table with its vase of flowers, he was feeling that the idea of having been going to do anything else but come straight here to see Florence was unthinkable. His heart felt very heavy with mingled emotions that he doggedly repressed.

“They've made me very comfortable here, John,” she said.

“Mmmmm!” he agreed. “I'm sure of it.”

He swallowed a lump in his throat as he turned to her again. He took her hand as he sat on the edge of the bed.

In his mind there was the question:

. . . What has the doctor decided? . . .

But he exclaimed in an effort to be jolly:

“You've no idea how glad I am to be back again!”

“I'm sure you must be, dear,” she said softly. “And I *am* so glad you've come back, my darling! You know, I've been counting the minutes all the morning.”

“Well, I came straight here in a taxi,” he explained, and kissed her again. But the memory of his countermanded instructions to the taxi driver to take him to the shop and of his plan to have lunch and proceed to the hospital at leisure was acute in his mind.

“Won't you take off your overcoat?” she suggested. “Make yourself comfortable.”

“Yes, perhaps I will. It's warm in here. It's very cold outside, though.”

. . . What has the doctor decided? persisted his mind. . . .

"It must be, dear. Your hands are as cold as can be," she declared as she felt his big hairy hands in her own. "Warm them by the fire, John. You mustn't have your hands so cold as that."

He stood up, dragged off his overcoat, threw it over the arm of the chair in which his hat lay, and bent down and rubbed his hands in front of the gas-fire.

. . . There's so much I want to say to her, he was thinking. What did Dr. Wynnerson say, dear? She seems weak, to me. And she's certainly pale. Poor love. . . .

"Did Naomi meet you all right?" Mrs. Moffatt asked, her face sideways on the pillow.

. . . Why bother about this little thing? he was thinking. . . .

"Oh yes, she was there right enough," he answered.

"I asked her to be sure and be at the wharf in good time."

"Oh, that was quite all right."

. . . What has been decided about her? Has she to be operated on? . . .

"Naomi told you all about the silly things I've been doing, I suppose?" asked Mrs. Moffatt quietly.

"Yes, dear. She told me you'd been foolish enough to get yourself into a hospital."

"Did she tell you anything that the doctor said?"

"Not a great deal."

"Dr. Wynnerson thought I had appendicitis. So he had me hurried off here as quickly as he could. I hope it didn't worry you to hear such a thing."

He rose from before the gas-fire and walked towards her bed again.

"Did the doctor examine you this morning?" he asked, as he sat on the edge of it.

He wondered vaguely whether she thought him dreadfully uncaring for not having asked this question before.

"Yes, and I'm so thankful. He's decided that an operation won't be necessary."

His eyes brightened and he smiled broadly.

"*Won't* be necessary!" he repeated, excitedly.

A little colour flushed into her wan cheeks as she nodded and said, "Yes. *Oh*, it's such a relief."

The last word scarcely passed her lips, for he was kissing her again.

"My dear old girl!" he exclaimed as he sat up. "I *am* pleased about that!" Though he was aware that the exclamation did not express half the relief he felt. "You've no idea," he went on, casting aside all restraint, "all the

shocking things I was thinking about while I was coming here!”

“About the appendicitis? Oh, you shouldn't have been so silly. You were thinking about an operation, I suppose.”

“Naturally. Naomi couldn't tell me what Wynnerson had decided.”

“Well, you mustn't worry about me any more. Promise me that.”

“Oh, I won't worry now.”

“Because I'm sure I'll be all right in a week or so. If you can do without me for a little while, I'll not be long before I'll be able to look after you again. I've been thinking what you'd better do about your meals. You might ask old Mrs. Harris to come in every day until I come back—just to dust round a bit and get your meals for you.”

“Oh, I won't bother about Mrs. Harris. I can have meals at one of the hotels.”

He was at the same time thinking:

. . . Buy a saveloy or a meat-pie from the ham and beef shop and eat it in the dispensary. Less expensive. . . .

“Now, none of your little scratch meals in the shop, John,” urged Mrs. Moffatt, as though divining his reflections. “Have proper meals, or I'll be worried about you.”

“Oh, that's all right, darling. I'll get all I want.”

He was feeling quite cheerful now. There was nothing to worry about after all.

“Well,” he said, smiling, after a little pause, “you know all about the old picture. You got my letters to you?”

“Yes, dear. And I've been so terribly disappointed for your sake. I don't mind myself. But I knew you were setting your heart on making a lot of money from the thing, and I hoped and hoped that you wouldn't be too disheartened.”

“Disheartened? Well—how absurd! I'm not *disheartened*! I don't mind a bit about it. All over now, anyway. Oh, I was quite prepared whichever way it went.”

“I'm very glad of that. But I was afraid you were building up on the hope of being able to get out of the shop. And now here you are, you have to go back to it. And there's nobody at home to look after you.”

He could not help feeling irritated at the idea of his ever having wanted to retire from the shop and of having any reluctance to return to it. But he just smiled and stroked her hand.

. . . She seldom really understands me, he reflected. . . .

“And where's the picture now?” she inquired, taking hold of his hand and squeezing it.

“Being unloaded from the *Montane* very likely,” he said.

“You've brought it home again?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“What else could I do? The most I was offered in London was eighty pounds.”

“Was it really! And such a beautiful picture, too.”

“Well, the thing was it was not a genuine master. A good picture—yes. But neither of the authorities that Sir Wilbur Canes gave me letters of introduction would declare it to be by any artist known to them. Sir Arthur Mallesing said he thought it looked as if it might be a *copy* of an unknown Vermeer. But that didn't help me.”

“I suppose that eighty pounds seemed so small after you'd been dreaming of thousands,” Mrs. Moffatt diagnosed.

“Well, it seemed to me at the time a *ridiculous* price. I thought I might just as well bring it back to Sydney and offer it to Sir Wilbur Canes for the Sydney Art Gallery. Canes certainly thought it a beautiful piece of work.”

“Yes, he seemed to like it, right enough. And I'm sure it interested him. Well, I should write to Sir Wilbur Canes.”

“I'm going to.”

Chapter Five

I. Lunch

Two days later, shortly after one o'clock in the afternoon, Mr. Moffatt stood before the marble-topped portion of the bench in the dispensary.

With his right hand he was mixing a greasy-looking ointment with a spatula on the ointment slab. By a dexterous circling movement of his wrist he was working a brownish substance in with a greenish one, and the two were gradually blending. Now and again when the ointment had become spread over too large an area of the slab and was in danger of spilling over on to the bench, he would slide his spatula under the fringes of the stuff and topple them into the middle. Or he would scrape up all the ointment on to his spatula, hold it suspended during a critical moment, then slap it down top-side under and begin thrusting at it and pressing it afresh.

In his left hand he grasped a partly-eaten meat pie, and on the desk beside the prescription book there lay three brown paper bags, one containing a second meat pie, another a buttered bread roll, and the third an apple and a couple of mandarines. As he worked the ointment he now and then took a bite of meat pie. Between chews of meat pie he was—from force of habit—faintly hissing the overture from “Carmen,” and his movements of the spatula tended to become an accompaniment to this melody.

“Hiss, hiss, hississ, hiss—hiss, hississ, hiss, hiss. . . .”

But he was thinking:

. . . Dreadfully tasteless, these meat pies. Don't know why they should be so insipid. Pies that Florence makes are delicious. Doesn't matter. These scratch meals won't be for long. She talked of being home again next week. I'm not so sure of *that*. Oh, she *might*. They don't give you much satisfaction at these hospitals when you ask them on the 'phone how a patient is. “Just about the same.” Yes, they've said that to me practically each time I've inquired since I left her the day I landed. Oh, I suppose there might not be much change in her for several days. Only hope to goodness she isn't worrying about me and my meals and my bed being made and the house kept clean. I'll jolly well have to get hold of old Mrs. Harris before Florence comes back and have the whole house cleaned out. I didn't notice how dusty everything was in the sitting room until I went to wind the clock this morning. You don't notice the dirt at night. I'll have to have a thoroughly good go to-night at those dishes in the kitchen. Don't think there'll be enough things for breakfast unless I do. Naomi never seems to

have time to do anything. I've really scarcely set eyes on her for more than ten minutes all told since I saw her outside the wharf. She seems to have all her meals out—except breakfast. And she's finished her breakfast before I sit down to mine. Oh, I know she's got her work. The school's been opened again. And then there's this Service Society, and her lecture classes. Fancy Naomi learning to lecture! H'm. Huh, huh! Well, I never imagined that. I'll have some of that blessed bread roll before I start on my other meat pie, I think. . . .

He abandoned his activities with the spatula while he extracted the roll from its enclosing paper bag, waited until he had swallowed a couple of pieces of it, then rested what remained on top of the bag, opened the bag containing the second meat pie, grasped the pie, pulled it out, began to eat it while he held it in his left hand, and with his right hand took up the spatula again and resumed his working of the ointment.

. . . Don't suppose Kensal enjoyed himself particularly since Florence went into hospital. His bed doesn't look as if it had been made for days. Wonder did he have all his meals at the hotel? Said he did, of course, and I've allowed him for them. Oh, I'm not doubting him. Suppose it was very decent of him to sleep here since there was nobody to look after him. He said he liked to be here if an urgent prescription were wanted. But it meant that Naomi had to stay with the Percivals. Peculiar idea that Naomi couldn't sleep in the house because Kensal was the only person sleeping in it. Oh, suppose I wouldn't have liked the idea of it—but—I don't know. I suppose if two people of different sex sleep alone in a house it's quite impossible to imagine that they won't have intercourse together. As if they were dogs. If that isn't the reason, what is it? Oh, I'd never dream of saying a word about it. *This* blessed pie seems half gristle! . . .

He removed a length of gristle from between his teeth, threw it into the waste box, took a bite of bread, another bite of pie, and went on mixing the ointment.

. . . I'm jolly glad Kensal wanted to sleep here on the premises. He'd have been justified in taking a room at the hotel, and I suppose I'd have had to pay for it. As it is, the profit from the shop for the last few weeks will scarcely pay his salary. Oh, I *wish to God* I'd never gone away! . . . If I'd been here things would have been *nothing like* so bad. But to be away, and in my absence for Menningham to sell his business to these big people, Blue Band Pharmacies, Limited! Greatest chemists in the world, I think they call themselves. Only the world, not the solar system. Oh, they've got modesty. If I'd had any idea these people were going to open against me, I wouldn't have gone away—no fear!—not for any picture. While Menningham was all I had against me there was nothing to worry about.

Suppose I didn't realise how fortunate I was to have only him. Drunkard, Menningham was. People wouldn't trust him. And now to come back and find your business ruined for you—well, practically—yes, practically ruined. Yes, fifty-five to sixty pounds a week was my average before I went away. And I remember I didn't consider that couldn't be improved on. *Last week's* takings—twenty-five pounds! *Think* of it! Never could have believed it. A blessed tragedy. And I owe the bank seven hundred. Well, you could almost laugh at that. How the blazes they're going to get their seven hundred——! Oh, blast these bits of gristle! . . .

He pulled another piece of gristle out of his mouth, consigned it to the waste box, took another bite of bread, swallowed the remainder of the pie, then, chewing more bread, took up the task of thoroughly massaging that ointment again.

. . . It mightn't have been so bad if it was only a matter of these Blue Band people opening here. But it's these four months of Kensal as well. Oh, you can see by the book that the takings began to drop when he'd been here only a few weeks—quite before the Blue Band Company came. Before he'd been here a month the average was only forty to forty-five. *That* wouldn't have happened if I hadn't gone away. It's too bad. And now I can scarcely *find* anything in the confounded shop. Kensal taking it into his head to put things into all kinds of different places—I—I *scarcely know* the shop. And there are no end of things want ordering, and he hasn't entered them in the wanted book. It's a great shame. To have people coming in and asking for things, and after I've searched all over the shop and kept them waiting ten minutes to have to tell them that I'm out of stock! Practically have to *send* them down to the Blue Band people. Oh, it's damnable. He even neglected to keep the Seidlitz powder drawer filled. Fancy yesterday morning having to wrap up a Seidlitz powder! And the man was in a hurry, too. Of course it's Ernest's work to keep those drawers of Epsom salts and Seidlitz powders filled. But he's such a stupid lad. No brains in that Ernest at all. Seems to me that Kensal has allowed the boy to neglect his work, too. Shop was in an awful state when I came back from the hospital. Simply filthy! *Filthy!* God knows how long it's been like that. And when you think of these Blue Band people all the time with their place as clean and as bright as they can make it——! . . .

He stirred the spatula into the ointment with vigour.

. . . Yes, this Blue Band shop is supposed to be so wonderful, I'd give something to see it. Wouldn't do for me to be seen looking at it, though. Seem as if I cared about them. Kensal must have actually gone *into* the blessed shop, by the lot he knows about it. Evidently they've taken Menningham's shop and the place next door as well, and knocked them

into one. It's just for display. Can't possibly do enough business to justify it. He seemed to think they had the most beautiful soda fountain in Sydney. Well, they won't do much trade this time of the year with *that*. Yes, of course, I believe he did say they served coffee and sandwiches there. And they even sell tobacco and cigarettes. And have a lending library. And if you buy a camera from them they develop your first four films free and give you one free print from every picture. Huh! What a way to draw business. And of course I know they sell all their things pennies cheaper than I can afford to do. Beggars they are! Why can't they charge decent prices, and give the small man a chance? Only two shillings for an eight-ounce mixture. Absurd. And they've got a free weighing machine. And you can weigh the baby free, too. And for goodness sake, fancy their having a qualified nurse in attendance every afternoon to give free advice to mothers. Of course she can't be really qualified. But people are gullible. And they've got a motor-cycle with a side-carrier for delivery. Well, I've seen it about only once since I've been back, so they can't be doing such a lot of business. Oh, I know, Kensal said their shop was full of people when he saw it. Well, I can't say, I'm sure. There isn't room for both of us at Six Ways Cross. I'm sure of that. There's a good living for one. Menningham was in debt, I know. He could never make a living against me. That's why he sold out to these Blue Band people, I suppose. Beggars they are, with their low prices. Under-cut you all round. If I had their capital——! That was a pretty stale bread roll. . . .

The ointment was now to his satisfaction, and he left it while he took the apple from its paper bag and began to eat it.

. . . Oh, be bothered! They can't keep that big show going and a big staff of assistants and a man with nothing else to do but drive that motor-cycle contrivance. It simply can't be done—that's all. It's a matter of just how long they *can* keep it up. I really wouldn't care a curse if Florence were well, and here at home. But the way the takings have gone down and down, and the money I owe the bank, and Florence being so ill——! It's just everything coming on you at once that gets you beaten. Not even a decent fireside to go to when the shop's closed for the night and I'm dog tired. Simply dead-dog tired. Not even a clean table cloth or the bed made or decent food. This is a devil of a lonely house without Florence. There's no use trying to hide it from myself: I miss her frightfully. I'd never have imagined it. If anything were *really* to happen to her——. Well, for the love of heaven, what's the use of making yourself miserable by thinking about *that*? There she is, lying in bed in that tiny, cheerless, little room in St. Margaret's, longing to be at home with me; and here I am longing to be with her. And we're held apart. Why? What's the use of it? . . .

He sighed and went on chewing apple.

. . . Yes, there's still the picture. At the jolly old eleventh hour that might bring something. If the Art Gallery were to buy it——. Oh, they might. Ought to get at least a hundred pounds from them for it. Tidy little sum—— hundred pounds. Ought to hear from Sir Wilbur Canes to-morrow. He'd get my letter to-day. He could reply at once whether he thought it worth while sending the picture to the Art Gallery for inspection. I can always remember the way he said that if London considered it to be a master the Sydney Art Gallery would probably like to submit me an offer for it. No doubt Canes will still be interested in it though it isn't a master. Well, it'd be an extraordinary thing if I got a really decent price, two or three hundred, for it, wouldn't it, now? Yet that's the way things happen, by jove! I spent only two hundred and seventy on the trip home. If I could get just that back for the picture, I wouldn't be any worse off than when I left, and I'll have had the holiday. Oh, there are *possibilities*, right enough. And there's one thing about those Blue Band pharmacies——people don't like to trust them with prescriptions. If I can still hold on to the prescriptions——well, the beggars are welcome to all the business they can do in patent medicines and cameras and counter lunches and lending library and tobacco and cigarettes. I wouldn't honestly give a cuss for all the counter trade if I could still get the dispensing. One of the nicest apples I've tasted for a long time——this. Hallo, the 'phone. Who will this be? . . .

He threw the core of the apple into the waste box, wiped his lips with his handkerchief, walked across to the telephone, lifted the receiver to his ear, and spoke into the transmitter.

“Hallo, hallo!” he exclaimed.

“Oh, hallo!” came a faint voice into his ear. “Is that—er—is that you, Mr. Moffatt? This is Dr. Wynnerson speaking.”

. . . What does *he* want? asked his mind. . . .

And his heart was beating a little more rapidly.

“Yes, doctor!” he answered. “This is Moffatt speaking.”

“Yes,” came the voice through the receiver again. “Well, look here, Moffatt, about your wife.”

“Oh yes.”

“I've seen her again this morning.”

“Oh yes.”

“She's—I'm afraid she's become slightly worse.”

“Oh, dear, dear!”

“Now I want to operate on her.”

“Oh!”

“But I thought I'd speak to you first, you see.”

“Yes, I see. Well——”

“Suppose you've no objection.”

“I——”

“Eh?”

“No, no.”

“You see, I thought we might have pulled her through without an operation. I always try to avoid it.”

“Quite so.”

“I really thought she was going to be all right. But this morning I find there's another irritation set in. You know what it is in these cases, Moffatt.”

“Oh yes, yes.”

“I'm afraid I daren't let her go on any longer. She was a bit run down with it before she called me in. She'd been trying to put up with it, you know. Trying to save expense, I suppose. It doesn't do, Moffatt, it doesn't do.”

“Oh, I had no idea——”

“She's getting weak with it now, you see. The sooner she's operated on the better.”

“Yes.”

“Then I'll operate on her at three o'clock this afternoon. It will be all right. You needn't worry about her. If you telephone to St. Margaret's, say, about six o'clock, they'll be able to tell you how she's getting on. But—she'll be all right.”

“Very well, doctor. I'm much obliged to you, you know, for ringing me up. It's very——”

“Quite all right, Moffatt. Quite all right. Good-bye, old man.”

“Good-bye, doctor.”

He lifted the receiver on to its hook again, but remained with his hand holding it for several minutes.

His heart was bumping against his ribs now.

. . . Three o'clock this afternoon, he was thinking. . . .

II. Pictures

At half past five he was walking up and down, his hands in his trousers pockets, over the worn green linoleum of the dispensary floor.

. . . Well, he was thinking, this is something new for me. Nothing to do, eh! Gentleman of leisure. Oh, I suppose there's humour in it. Three prescriptions to-day! That ointment and the two mixtures. There must be a stampede of customers at our friends' shop down the street. Oh, I might get one or two more prescriptions to-night, I know. You can never tell. But I

don't know—I'm not that particular. No end of troubles, so let 'em come. Oh, it's no use going on thinking like that. Childish. Might as well get a book and read as parade the floor. Then as soon as I get hold of a book, I suppose, somebody's sure to come in and want something. Well, if it draws trade, I ought certainly to get a book. Oh, it's no good trying to be funny. In the deepest part of myself I don't feel inclined for fun. I couldn't possibly concentrate on a book, anyhow. . . .

He stopped walking, pulled out his watch, looked at it, held it to his ear to make sure it still ticked, slipped it back into his waistcoat pocket, sighed, and went on walking, up and down, up and down.

. . . Twenty-five to six. What an eternity of an afternoon! Seems ages ago that it was quarter past five. . . .

In his mind there was a picture of a white room, with several white-garbed figures gathered round a woman's naked body stretched on a delicate white structure. There was a deep wound in the woman's pale flesh, and there was blood there, and there were splotches of blood over the white clothing of the chief of the figures standing beside the body, and there was blood dripping from his hands, and in one of his bloody hands he held a sharp little instrument; and the instrument too was stained with blood.

. . . Oh, my God! my God! were the words in Mr. Moffatt's mind as he continued his pacing over the faded green linoleum. What a business it is! No use thinking about it. Won't do *one bit* of good. But how the devil can I stop thinking? . . .

He had a feeling as if the skin of his own abdomen were slit across, and gaped open. He could feel the stinging pain of the wound. And through his mind there were the strains of the overture to Wagner's "Rienzi," which he had heard played by an orchestra in a theatre in London during the pathetic scenes of a motion picture that had deeply impressed him. Then he could feel a knife blade, thin and sharp as a razor, cutting into his flesh, and see the blood bursting up through the parting in the skin.

He frowned and involuntarily drew himself in as if to escape the imagined pain.

. . . Ah, it's awful! he went on thinking. But it's bound to be over by now. Oh, she'll be out of the chloroform by this time. Don't know whether to ring up now or leave it till six o'clock. Longer I leave it the more they'll be able to tell me. Wynnerson said ring at six. I'll leave it till then. Better to hang on. They mightn't have begun sharp at three o'clock. *Sharp* at three. Sharp. Sharp! Oh, what's the use of going on like that? If I thought for a moment I could read, I'd get a book this moment and read. Don't worry about that. But I'm too fidgety to read. Well, what am I going to have for

tea? There's something to think about. Sardines? There's a tin of herrings, too, in the pantry, unless Naomi's had them. I could send out young Ernest to get me a few slices of ham or something. Though I don't want ham. Don't want anything, really. Better eat something, I suppose, that's all. Just bread and butter. Oh, I don't want that. With jam. Oh, I don't fancy any kind of jam. With some of that fish paste. Ugh, no! Not to-night. Just some fruit. No, too cold. Like something hot. Too much trouble to make tea, though. Oh, I couldn't stand another of those meat pies or a sausage roll or a saveloy or any of those things. I'd vomit up anything like that, I'm sure. . .

In his mind there was the idea of a pale face. Then he could see Mrs. Moffatt's pale face as she lay in bed, her eyes closed. So very pale, and looking so weak. And it was as if somebody were speaking to him.

. . . "Yes, they did their best, but it was hopeless. She was operated on too late. She never came out of the chloroform." Oh, what rot! his thoughts went on. Too late. I wonder, I wonder! Too late, too late, too late! Oh, for God's sake don't say that. Tch, tch! What a terrible tragedy it would be. . . .

In his mind there was again the melody of the "Rienzi" overture as if rendered by a multitude of violins. The noble dignity of the music recalled him again to the motion picture, and as he continued to walk up and down, up and down, he felt an actor in a stage tragedy, a martyr.

. . . Oh, rubbish! his thoughts continued. I don't feel dramatic. It's all deeper than that. I'm no hero. . . .

He sighed.

Now he could imagine himself answering the telephone, and hearing the voice of Dr. Wynnerson saying, "I'm very, very sorry for you, Moffatt. I couldn't have done more than I did." And there was himself answering lamely, "Oh, it's not necessary for you to say that, doctor. I'll get over this somehow. It's very good of you. Yes, I know. No, you mustn't say that. There's no bravery about it."

. . . All nonsense, protested his mind. No earthly use in letting myself go on like that. Now what am I going to have for tea? Think about that. No, I can't go over to the hotel. Very attractive; but I can't afford to shut the shop and send more people down to the Blue Band crowd. Wonder would the hotel people make me a Welsh rarebit and send it over hot? Where's Ernest? I'll send him across. Of course the lad's not here when I want him. .

He walked to the residence door, opened it, walked across the passage, opened the back door, and called loudly, "Ernest! *Ernest!* Are you there, Ernest?"

. . . Not out there, his thoughts went on, as he returned and shut the doors

behind him. Little beggar he is! Getting late, too. . . .

He drew out his watch again, glanced at it, and returned it to its pocket.

. . . Ten to six. I mustn't keep him here any later than six. Wonder would it be worth while 'phoning to the hospital *now*? If he doesn't come in in a minute or so, there won't be time for him to go across to the hotel. I fancy a Welsh rarebit, no matter what they charge for it. It's the only thing I do fancy. It'll be something on a decent clean plate. Where *is* the boy? He went with that mixture to Mrs. Levington in Clareside Road. Not back yet. Ridiculous. Suppose he's dawdling about somewhere. I could 'phone to the hospital at once, then perhaps by the time I've done that he'll be back. But I want to leave 'phoning the hospital till the last minute. What the devil will they say? "I'm very sorry to have to tell you, Mr. Moffatt——" No, no, no. Wynnerson had no fears. Might as well 'phone at once. Oh, it's the devil, this business. Where can that boy have got to? . . .

He looked again at his watch.

. . . Five to. No use leaving it any longer. Better ring up now. Perhaps if I were to leave it till half past . . . That boy will *have* to go to the hotel for me, whatever time he comes in. I'll *make* him. What's their number—these people? I knew it well enough, but I can't remember it. . . .

He went to the telephone, looked up the number of St. Margaret's in the directory, and, while his heart was thumping, took off the receiver from its hook.

"Er—er—Standlick—er—seven two oh," he said into the transmitter, in response to the voice of the exchange girl in his ear.

As he waited in front of the instrument, there was a picture in his mind of a woman lying in bed, and crying out in pain. He knitted his brows.

. . . It was not quite four o'clock when I sent Ernest off with that mixture, he forced himself to think. . . .

There was a voice now in the telephone receiver inquiring what he wanted.

"Is that St. Margaret's?" he asked. "Would you mind—er—telling me how—er—Mrs.—Moffatt—is, please?"

The name was repeated in his ear, and he was asked to wait.

In his mind he could see a woman in bed. She was cut across her body, and the wound was stitched. She writhed about in bed because her pain was unbearable, so that the stitches were being broken and the wound gaping open again.

He shuddered.

. . . That's just my wretched imagination, his thoughts continued. Oh, why are they so long in telling me? . . .

"Hallo!" said the voice from St. Margaret's again. "Mrs. Moffatt's as well

as can be expected.”

“Thank you very much.”

He paused with the receiver still held to his ear. He was disappointed.

“Oh,” he said suddenly, “can't you tell me anything more?”

“Well, that is what I was told to tell you. She's really come through the operation very well.”

“Has she really? Very well!”

“Yes, very well indeed.”

“Oh, thank you so much. I'm much obliged to you.”

He heard footsteps in the shop as he replaced the receiver.

Half smiling, he walked quickly to the dispensary door which led to the front of the shop and confronted Ernest, smelling strongly of cigarette smoke, and his cheeks reddening at the sight of his master.

“Here, Ernest,” said Mr. Moffatt, “take this half-crown to the hotel over the road, and tell the people there to make me an extra big Welsh rarebit, with plenty of cheese in it. And boil me a couple of eggs. And see if they can make me a few corned beef sandwiches with plenty of mustard and tomato sauce in them. And send me over a pot of tea enough for four or five cups. Here, you'd better take five shillings. Tell them I want all these things immediately. Hurry up, now, Ernest!”

He rubbed his hands together excitedly as Ernest disappeared again.

III. His Decision

It was in the early afternoon of the following day that the postman dropped several letters on top of the glass counter. Mr. Moffatt picked them up and looked at them as the uniformed figure disappeared out of the shop again.

. . . Only an invoice, his thoughts proceeded, as he brought the letters round to the desk. This one's a circular. But who's this from? Don't know the writing. . . .

He slipped open the envelope, drew out the enclosed letter, and unfolded it.

. . . Oh—Sir Wilbur Canes. About the picture. What does he say? Dear Mr. Moffatt, Many thanks for your letter, and so on. I have spoken about your picture to several of my committee, and I'm afraid—oh—it would scarcely be worth while for you to have it sent to the gallery for inspection. Ah. No doubt you will have no difficulty, however, in disposing of it elsewhere. I am very much obliged to you for bringing to my notice the fact that your picture was on offer, and only regret that we are not in a position to purchase it from you. And so on and so on. Well, so much for

that. . . .

He drew in a deep breath and shut his lips tightly. Then he began to hiss a bright refrain from “Rigoletto,” but in his mind intruded the words:

. . . Another disappointment. Why the devil didn't you leave it in London and be satisfied with eighty pounds? Well, I'd take eighty pounds for it now. I seem to be doomed to have this picture. Don't seem able to get it off my hands. Confound it. . . .

“Hiss, hiss, hiss, hissississ—hiss, hiss, hiss, hissississ——”

He read the letter through again while he continued with his opera tune and slit up the envelope of the other letters with a spatula. One contained, as he had thought, an invoice. He pressed this on to a spike above the desk. The other was a pricelist of surgical and other appliances. There were illustrations of scalpels and surgical scissors and evil-looking sharp little knives. He shuddered, crushed the paper in his hand and threw it into the waste box.

. . . Yes, Florence. I'll ring up the hospital at three. Quite time enough. Now what about this picture? I must have it moved from the wharf. Have to go to an auction sale room, that's all. Simpkins and Tayler. They're good people. Write them a letter now. Florence. Let me see: they've charged me seventeen and eightpence for that linseed oil. Seems a lot. I'll look up the previous invoice. Florence. Three o'clock will do. It's only twenty-five to now. Better write to the shipping company, too, and ask them to have the picture sent to Simpkins and Tayler's rooms. H'm, I'll do that. Florence. Write to Simpkins and Tayler first. Where's a piece of paper? August the first, nineteen twenty-four. Florence. Messrs. Simpkins and Tayler. *E.R.* I remember it is. Florence. Castlereagh Street, Sydney. Florence. Dear Sirs. Let me see. Florence. Seventeen and eightpence. I'm sure I didn't pay that price for the last lot. H'm—er—er —I am sending an oil painting to your rooms within the next day or so, and wish you to submit it for sale at one of your usual auctions. Florence. How long is it since I was at the hospital? I arrived on Monday. To-day's Thursday. I haven't seen her for three days. They say she's making good progress, though. I think she'll be all right. Perhaps I'd better put, At your usual commission. Cross out, At one of your usual auctions. Don't want that. I'm almost certain I only paid sixteen and six for that other lot of linseed oil. It's jumped up very suddenly. Florence. Better put some kind of reserve on the picture. Just a nominal sum. Sixty pounds. Fifty. Florence. Oh, it isn't likely that she'd have taken a turn for the worse since I rang up this morning. Oh, there's no doubt she's got over this operation splendidly. I should like you to place a reserve of fifty pounds on the picture. Ought to give them a few particulars about it. Florence. Though the painting is of unquestioned merit as a work of art, I

fear I am unable to give you much information concerning its authorship. Florence. Three whole days that I haven't seen her. I don't know why they keep sending me those price lists of surgical instruments. I bought a spatula from them once, and this is the result. Florence. Wonder is she well enough to want to see anybody, or just too weak to care? I'm sure it was only sixteen and six. I'll look it up. Florence. I don't know, I'm sure. Can't possibly leave the shop unless I engage Kensal to look after it. Sixteen and six. What else can I say to these people? Florence. Oh, she's bound to be in a certain amount of pain for several days. Concerning its authorship. H'm. Must add something else. Let me see, now. Concerning its authorship. Florence. If she's wondering why you don't call to see her—after the operation—! If it seems strange to her that you don't visit her, if only for half-an-hour, quarter-of-an-hour——! Concerning its authorship. It has been considered by a London authority (though I have not permission for you to mention his name) to be possibly a copy of an unknown work by the Dutch painter, Vermeer. Florence. Oh, I'll ring up in a few minutes. It's not three o'clock yet. Just to have seen her for an hour or so after you'd been away four months, then not to visit her again during the following three days——! . . .

He cleared his throat, ran his forefinger between his collar and his neck, then held his pen suspended in the ink-well.

. . . Let me see. Probably by the Dutch painter, Vermeer. I'll wind it up now. Florence. I trust the picture will reach you safely, and—and—. Florence. Or, reach your rooms safely. Florence. Oh, I'll leave it as it is. Florence. Kensal would want fifteen shillings or a pound for looking after the shop while I went to see her. A pound's a pound. Florence. I don't know *what* to do. Florence. Oh, well, if I thought she was in a serious condition, of course I'd go. Florence. No, I'm not going to go. There's an end to it. No, I'm not. It's the expense. Can't help it. Can't afford it. Florence. Have to go over to her on Sunday afternoon. Florence. That'll be exactly a week since you last saw her. And then it was for only an hour. A pound. Florence. A week. A pound. Florence. Trust the picture will reach you safely, and——. Safely. Florence. Oh, and hope you will have no difficulty in disposing of it at a satisfactory figure. Florence. Yours faithfully, J. J. Moffatt. Florence. Envelope's are getting very low. I'll send Ernest to buy some more. Florence. What *is* it, now? Messrs. Simpkins and Tayler, Auctioneers, Castlereagh Street, Sydney. H'm h'm, h'm h'm and h'm h'm, h'm h'm h'm, h'm h'm h'm, h'm h'm. That's right. Florence. No, it's no use. I don't see how I *can* go. Too much expense. I'd go if it was at all possible, wouldn't I? She's getting on so *well*. That's the thing. It isn't that I wouldn't spend fifteen shillings or a pound to see her. Isn't that at all. Goodness gracious.

That's nonsense. Rubbish. No, I'll see her on Sunday.

He felt that his heart was very heavy as he folded the letter, slid it into the envelope, licked the envelope flap, and pressed it with his fist against the desk.

. . . Don't know why I should feel so depressed, his thoughts went on. Florence is making splendid progress. What more do I want? It won't be long before she's out of the hospital and quite herself again. *Perhaps* she's taken a turn for the worse since I rang up this morning. I'll 'phone to the hospital now. If she's not still getting on all right, I'll engage Kensal and go over to her tomorrow. That'll decide it. . . .

He sighed before he realised what he was doing. Then he walked to the telephone, obtained connection with St. Margaret's, and was informed that Mrs. Moffatt was still making a very good recovery.

. . . There! he reflected, as he walked back to the desk. What better news could I have? Nothing's the matter. She's getting on well. Everything's all right. No, I won't visit her until Sunday. I'll write to her. That'll do. I'll write her some cheerful nonsense about how I'm getting along. Tell her I'll be over on Sunday. . . .

It took him a long time to think what funny things he would write about. Despite the continued good news from the hospital, he did not feel inclined to be funny.

IV. Out of His Dream

That night he sat reading in the sitting-room until long after Naomi had come in and gone to bed. It was nearly midnight when he turned out the gas and went upstairs, and one o'clock before he was asleep.

He dreamt that Mrs. Moffatt had completely recovered and that life for him was as it had been before he ever went away. His meals were regularly prepared and satisfying. The house was clean, the bed was always properly made, his laundry was always attended to, he did not seem to have any worry about the amount of business he was doing in the shop. He seemed to be in the sitting room, in his easy chair, and Mrs. Moffatt to be seated opposite him; and there seemed to be a blazing fire in the grate. He seemed to be reflecting how happy he was that all this life had been restored, when he was conscious of a ringing from somewhere, several times repeated.

. . . Somebody at the telephone, he reflected in his dream. There it is again. Bother them. What can they want? I must see to them. . . .

In his dream he began to raise himself, very reluctantly, from his easy-chair, then found himself raised on his elbows in bed. For a few moments he paused in that attitude.

. . . Somebody at the telephone, his thoughts went on hazily. They've been ringing. Or have I been dreaming? It was very loud, the ringing. Only a dream, though. There isn't any ringing. Go to sleep again. Have I woken up Florence? . . .

He listened for her breathing, but could hear nothing.

. . . She's very quiet, he thought. What's the matter with her? . . .

There was a faint light over the double bed from the moon. He looked keenly at her pillow, but there seemed no head on it. Then his heart leapt.

. . . Damn fool, he reflected. Of course she's not here. That dream was so real. I must be still half asleep. She hasn't come back from the hospital yet. Go to sleep again. . . .

He felt cheated, disappointed and very much alone as he lowered his head on to the pillow again and shuffled himself into a comfortable posture between the bedclothes.

. . . Wish to God she *was* here, his thoughts went on. No use denying it. There's that bell again. . . .

The ringing in his dream was repeated.

. . . What is it? Telephone. . . .

He sat up sharply, the ringing loud in his ears. Hastily he threw over the bedclothes, swung himself out of bed, felt his feet into his slippers, wormed himself into his dressing gown, lit the candle on the table beside the bed, and with the trembling flame hovering before him, walked out of the bedroom, across the landing, and down the stairs.

. . . Doctor, his thoughts continued. Wants a prescription at once. Huh! May only be somebody on the wrong number. Wouldn't be the first time. Jolly cold. Damn it, I thought that was the bottom step. Have electric light all through the house if I could afford it. Better than groping along with a little flicker like this. Gas is no good. Electric torch would be a good thing. Might be somebody to tell you the place is on fire. Oh no. Burglar may have been seen entering. Hope not. No, no, no, no. Perhaps they've been ringing for ages. Couldn't make me hear. Wonder Naomi wasn't woken up. Only hope they don't ring the bell again until I get to the receiver. Makes such an unearthly noise in the house at night. Uncanny. . . .

He was in the dispensary and at the telephone now, and now he was lifting the receiver off its hook and holding it to his ear. His hand was trembling with the excitement of getting so suddenly out of bed.

"Hallo!" he said into the transmitter.

"Can't you get them, exchange?" said a woman's voice. "Ring them again, will you?"

"Hallo!" repeated Mr. Moffatt. "This is Claverley six oh."

"Is that Mr. Moffatt?" asked the woman's voice.

“Yes.”

“This is St. Margaret's, Mr. Moffatt.”

“Oh—er—yes.”

“I'm awfully sorry to have troubled you, but I thought I'd better let you know.”

“Yes, yes.”

“Mrs. Moffatt is not so well to-night, and the head-sister thinks it would be a good thing if you could come over here.”

“Oh, yes, yes.”

“Mrs. Moffatt wants very much to see you.”

“Oh!”

“She's been asking for you.”

“Yes, yes. Thank you. Thank you. I'll come at once.”

“I think it would be as well for you to come if you could possibly manage it.”

“Oh, certainly. I'll come across *now*.”

“Thank you so much. I know it's a very awkward time. I'm awfully sorry——”

“Quite all right. Good night.”

His heart was beating hard as he slicked the receiver back on its hook.

There was not a sound in the shop except the sound of his own movement. Silence was over all the streets of Six Ways Cross.

. . . Go at once, he reflected, as he picked up the candle from the dispensary bench and walked out of the dispensary into the passage and up the stairs. Soon as I can get dressed. Slip into my clothes. Pull something over my pyjamas. Oh, better get dressed properly. St. Margaret's, Standlick. Quite three miles from here. Walk? And walk back again? Six miles. Deserted streets. Might be waylaid and robbed. Oh, rubbish. I'm not afraid of that. Policemen about. . . .

Returned to his bedroom, he lit the gas and began to dress.

. . . Could 'phone that young chap who keeps the taxi down the street, his thoughts went on as he did so. Says on his card he's available any hour, day or night. Ring him now. He'll be here by the time you're dressed. Whisk you over in a few minutes. Take you an hour to walk. Go on. Get on to him now. Slip downstairs again. I don't think I'll bother about it. Charge seven or eight shillings this time of night, I'm sure. Hope the devil she's not really bad. Confound this appendicitis. What did they say? “Not so well to-night,” I think it was, or something. “She wants to see you.” Tch, tch! How unfortunate! “She's been asking for you.” Wonder what has happened? She's got a bit low, I suppose, and naturally wants to see me. Evidently been worried about my not going to see her. I thought she'd understand it

was hard for me to leave the shop. So expensive to get a man in. Tch, tch, tch! Dear, dear little girl. I'll see her in a little while, anyhow. Wanting to see me, eh! *Wonder* has she suddenly got really bad? Ought to have asked them. Just as likely something she'll get over soon. They get nervous at these hospitals. Like to be on the safe side. Oh, I don't feel there's anything seriously wrong. Damn it, perhaps I ought to get that taxi. Nearly dressed now. Seven shillings—eight shillings. Florence. Well, dear, I'll be over to see you very soon. "Not so well to-night." Oh, sometimes they go back a little after an operation for appendicitis. You see, it's pounds here and pounds there, and shillings here and shillings there. All these expenses at the hospital. Oh, I don't begrudge the money for *that*. And all I owe the bank. I must save every penny I possibly can. Got to draw in my horns. Seven or eight shillings. No, I'll walk. Oh, it won't make such a difference in the end. Taxi. Florence. Three miles. Taxi. Wonder should I tell Naomi before I go? Wonder is she asleep? I'll knock at her door. A taxi. "*Not so well to-night.*" I'll just knock at her door, and if she answers tell her I'm going over to St. Margaret's; then I'll leave at once. Don't want her to take it into her head to ask questions about what I'm doing. Don't want to have to tell her I'm walking. She'll tell me where I can get a taxi. Then I'll have to say why I don't want a taxi. And I don't feel inclined to discuss the matter. *Not getting* a taxi, that's all. . . .

He was pulling his tie straight, and now he was buttoning his waistcoat and pulling it down straight, and now his coat he was screwing into and buttoning it and pulling it down straight all round.

. . . Funny I should have been dreaming about Florence, he reflected as he lit the candle again and turned off the tap of the gas before walking out of the bedroom on to the landing. And now I'm going to see her. Oh, I'm coming all right, my darling. Here I thought I wasn't going to see her until Sunday, and the very self-same night I go over to her. Funny. "Not so well to-night." Oh, I *wonder* if she's taken a bad turn. Merciful God! be kind to Florence. Don't let her suffer. It's just ten to three. I'll be there by a quarter to four. Perhaps I should have got that taxi. . . .

He stopped outside Naomi's bedroom door and knocked loudly on the panel.

"You awake, Naomi?"

"Yes. Yes, father. Is anything the matter?"

"I'm—they've just rung me up from the hospital. They want me to go over. I'm just leaving. But don't worry. I'll be back again before you're up."

"All right. Tell me what's the matter when you get back."

"Yes, I will. Good-bye, dear."

"Good-bye."

V. Tidings for Him

By the time he had reached St. Margaret's and was scrunching up the moonlit gravel path leading to the front door, he was feeling very excited at the prospect of seeing Florence and of learning just what was her condition. His walk had tired him; he seldom took much walking exercise; and he was looking forward to sitting down.

He was breathing hard as he mounted the wide stone steps up to the tiled verandah, pressed the bell push, and waited for the door to be opened.

. . . Perhaps by this time, he was reflecting, Florence has got better and has gone to sleep. When she wakes again they can tell her I called. She'll be glad to know that. Then by the morning post she'll get my letter. And Naomi said last night, of course, that she was going to visit her this evening. Tch, tch! It's these little delays, waiting for the door to be opened, and that kind of thing, that are so upsetting. Soon as I see her and know just how bad she is, I'll be all right. Looks like somebody's shadow against the glass. Yes, I thought so. . . .

The door was opened, and a nurse was confronting him whom he had not seen before. His lips suddenly felt dry.

"Will you come inside, please?" invited the nurse.

He thought her tone of voice very sympathetic.

"Thanks," he returned, and walked into the square hall.

. . . Evidently knows who I am, he reflected, as he paused on the carpet, his hands behind him holding his felt hat. . . .

"You are Mr. Moffatt, aren't you?" inquired the nurse, as she closed the door and walked up to him.

"Yes—that's right. You rang up for me."

"Yes. Would you mind coming this way?" She spoke tenderly.

She walked out of the hall and into the passage at the back of it.

"Thanks," he said, and followed her. He could smell iodoform.

. . . Florence, he was thinking. Wonder is she *really* bad? Florence. This isn't the way I was taken the time before. Changed her room, surely. Perhaps since the operation. I'll stay here with her if she wants me to until there's just time for me to get back and open the shop. Oh, I don't mind not having any more sleep. Oh, that's nothing. Least thing I can do for her. Glad to do something. Suppose I must be careful with her when I kiss her. Mustn't hug her and make her move. H'm. Not taking me straight to Florence. This is the head-sister's room, I think. . . .

The nurse who had admitted him ushered him into a room like an office, and announced him to an elderly nurse seated before a writing desk. There was a red, glowing fire in the grate behind her. There was thick carpet on

the floor. He felt it was a very cosy room. He was still panting a little from the exertion of his walk, the excitement of arriving at the hospital, and the prospect of seeing Florence again.

“Come in, will you, Mr. Moffatt?” said the nurse at the desk. The other nurse retired and shut the door behind her.

“Er—thank you,” he returned.

“Will you sit down?” she invited, indicating an armchair at the side of the desk.

“Thanks very much.”

He sank into it. It was very comfortable. He was relieved to be seated comfortably after his walk.

. . . What's the matter? his mind was saying. Why aren't I taken to see Florence? Something gone wrong? . . .

The white figure turned slightly in her swivel chair so as to face him. She cleared her throat as she did so.

“Can't I see Mrs. Moffatt at once?” he asked, before she could speak. “I was told on the 'phone that she wanted very much to see me.”

Something made him feel anxious.

“Yes—she did,” confirmed the nurse. “But I think the sister told you she had taken rather a bad turn, did she not?”

“I was told she was not so well to-night.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes. I've been wondering what had happened. She was getting on so well—making such good progress.”

“Yes, she was—considering. Considering her condition when she came to us. She'd got rather run down through not having this appendicitis seen to sooner. Her heart evidently was not strong, Mr. Moffatt.”

“I didn't know that.”

“I'm afraid I've very bad news for you now. Her heart began to fail towards midnight. She was getting so bad that I thought it best to send for you. You can never tell what will happen in these cases.”

“Quite so.”

“I'm afraid to say, Mr. Moffatt, that she died only a quarter of an hour ago.”

. . . Died, echoed his mind. . . .

“Oh dear!” he exclaimed. But there was no emotion in his voice. Apparently he received the news very calmly.

“It's very, very sad,” continued the voice from the white figure facing him. “Because you could have spoken to her if you'd been able to reach here half-an-hour earlier.”

It seemed that only dreamily he heard her words. She did not seem a real

person of flesh and blood as she sat in her swivel chair, the bright light from the electric lamp under its yellow silk shade shining on her face, and the crimson flames from the hot coals leaping in the grate behind her.

He became aware that his hands were cold.

“Even twenty minutes ago,” continued the voice from the white figure in the swivel chair—“if you could possibly have got here then, you might have spoken a word or so to her. She went very suddenly in the end. It's extremely sad that you should have come all this way and arrived just a few minutes too——”

“Oh, it's quite all right,” he found himself saying, and smiling, as he stirred in the comfortable armchair and sat forward ready to stand up again.

“If you'd like to go in and see her——”

“Oh, no, no!” He shook his head and pursed his lips. “No, I'd rather not do that.”

“I can't help feeling so dreadfully sorry for you, Mr. Moffatt. It seems such a——”

He smiled again. “Very good of you—indeed. But it's quite all right. Don't worry about *me*.”

“Your hands look so cold. Would you like to warm them by the fire?”

“Well, perhaps I would. I do feel them rather cold. Very cold outside, you know.”

He rubbed his hands together as he stood up and walked to the fireplace. The nurse rose quickly from her swivel chair, pushed it up against the writing desk and stood aside so as to give him plenty of room. He bent down and held his hands at a variety of angles towards the heat.

“Yes, I'm sure it's very cold outside,” agreed the nurse. “I was going to open this window about an hour ago, the room was getting too hot. But it was so cold outside that I had to shut the window again immediately.”

“Oh yes, I dare say you would.” He spoke quite buoyantly.

“Did you come over in a car, Mr. Moffatt?”

“No, I—er—didn't. I just walked.”

“Oh!”

The warmth of the fire was very comforting.

“Would you like me to order you a taxi to go home in?”

“Oh no, I won't bother about a taxi. I can walk back again.”

“Because I could get you one. It would be here in a few minutes.”

“Yes, thanks very much. No, I don't want a taxi.”

. . . Don't need a taxi, he was reflecting, as his hands warmed. I'm not keen on taking taxis all over the place. I'm not so sure that they're much quicker. They don't make such a difference. No, no, no. . . .

His hands were warm enough now, and he stood up and drew in a deep

breath.

"I think I might as well be making tracks home again," he declared, smiling.

"You wouldn't like me to have a cup of tea made for you?" The nurse seemed to want to do something for him.

"I don't think so," he answered, shaking his head, and backing away from the fire. "Thanks very much all the same."

He took up his hat from where he had dropped it on the floor beside the armchair. Then he walked to the door. The nurse hurried up to him and opened it as he was about to do so himself. She accompanied him along the passage into the square hall and opened the front door for him. He walked on to the step, then turned and said, "Well, I'll say good-night, nurse."

She held out her hand to him, and he shook it as he smiled at her with very tightened lips.

"Do accept my sincerest sympathy, Mr. Moffatt," she said. "I can't tell you how sorry I feel for you. I know what you must be going through."

He shook her hand again, relinquished it, turned and walked across the black and white tiles of the verandah, down the wide stone steps and on to the gravel path.

He heard the door shut.

VI. The Sound of His Footsteps

. . . About the last time I suppose I'll be at this place, his thoughts proceeded as he scrunched along the gravel towards the gate. Pretty dreary place, anyhow. Very exposed on this hillside. Wouldn't have a house in a situation like this for anything. I hate these noisy gravel paths, too. Feel as if you're slipping about on these blessed little brown pebbles. I'll walk on the grass, I think. . . .

He veered over on to the edge of the lawn through which the path threaded, and the grinding clamour of his footsteps was subdued to a faint k-lump! k-lump! k-lump! k-lump!

. . . Suppose I shouldn't be wearing out the lawn, his mind went on; but they'll just have to put up with it. The noise of that gravel gets on my nerves. It's wretched stuff. . . .

He was at the gate. He opened it, walked out, clacked it shut after him.

. . . Relief to be out of *that* place, he reflected as he walked up the asphalt pavement towards Claverley. Don't like these private hospitals. Always something about them that upsets me. Very depressing places, somehow. There's that atmosphere about them. . . .

Crack, crack, crack! resounded his footsteps on the hard, smooth surface

of the asphalt pavement.

He drew in a deep breath, broadened out his chest, and stretched his neck out of his collar.

. . . That feels better, he thought. Good, fresh air. Nothing like it. There's nobody to take *that* from you. Beautiful air, sweet, clean. . . .

He left the asphalt pavement, crossed the street, and mounted the pavement of another street abutting on it.

. . . Well, he went on thinking as he did so, here I am walking along. I seem to be going somewhere. Yes, somewhere. But where? Going home, I suppose. Heaven knows why. Certainly no wish to. No desire of mine is pushing me there. I'm just putting one foot before the other. I simply have *no* desire. Nevertheless I seem to be going in the direction of home. Well, what else can you do? You can't wander aimlessly. That'd be ridiculous. You'd soon get tired, anyway. Oh, I don't object to going home. I'll go home. I'll go anywhere you like. All right, home it is. I suppose if I *did* take the trouble to find out what would please me most, I'd discover that I'd like to lie down on the nearest piece of grass, and sleep. I think that's what's the matter with me. I'm tired. Haven't had my proper night's rest. Well, it's out of the question to go in search of a grassy bank and sleep on it. Next thing I'd find myself under the guidance of a sad-looking policeman, who'd be very sorry to find a respectable citizen dead drunk and far from home. Oh, shut up, I can't go on thinking. It makes my brain weary. I'm going home: that's where I'm going. That's an end to it. No wandering about for me, or sleeping on cold grass. Back to bed—that's the cry for the present. And on we go. . . .

Crack, crack, crack! echoed the sound of his footsteps on the asphalt.

. . . A perfect night, anyhow, he continued to reflect. You can see everything. How funny those telegraph poles look in the moonlight. Suppose they look just as funny in daylight, but I've never noticed it before. Here, this one's quite podgy compared with the one over there. And this one is *obviously* under-nourished. Here's one whose development's all run to its head. And if that one there with its bend isn't just like Mr. Pecksniff! I wonder somebody doesn't write an essay on the symbolism of the telegraph pole. Thoughts suggested by a streetful of telegraph poles. The telegraph pole as a mirror of human nature. Or, telegraph poles I have known. Very funny. . . .

The sound of his footsteps suddenly became almost inaudible after the clatter of them on the asphalt, as he stepped now on to a section of the pavement composed of trodden earth, from which stones projected.

. . . Glad to be a bit quieter again, his mind went on. Hate to kick up such a din every time I put my foot down. Makes you feel you're the only person

in the world. An awful feeling. Not to mention the number of light sleepers in the houses you pass who must be frantic with you. Hope my passage along here hasn't resulted in waking up every infant and caused half-a-dozen angry fathers to parade their bedroom floors with unappeasable progeny in their arms. Makes me feel a terrible person. Oh, damn these stones sticking out! Nearly tripped over that one. Why can't they make proper pavements? Somebody will be breaking his neck here one of these nights. I'll get on to the road, I think. . . .

He did so, and the subdued thuds of his footsteps were continued on the road's surface of stone and clay.

. . . Not much better here, his thoughts proceeded. Pot-holes all over the place. People on the council ought to be shot for leaving roads and footpaths like this. God knows the rates are high enough. But I'm not going to go on wearing out my brain. Too tired. And it'll take all my energy to get up this blessed hill. It was all right coming down here, about an hour ago, but it's a different proposition going back up it. Wonder what I was thinking of an hour ago when I was walking down here. Bothered if I know. I forget. Can't be bothered trying to remember. Going to stop thinking. . . .

The sounds of his footsteps came less frequently as he slowly walked along the road up the hill, over which the business district of Claverley, and his shop, lay.

His mind went on despite his resolution:

. . . Those packing tins at the back of the yard. Carrier from the Drug Company's coming tomorrow—well, that's to-day, if I must be precise. Ernest must take the straw out of them and put them all ready. It's best to stand two upright in a third one. Easier for the man to handle. “Yes, I've got those tins ready.” “You did fix up those tins, didn't you, Ernest?” Bacon and egg. Don't want the egg fried up like parchment. “Have you a nice fatty piece of bacon? Yes, I think that will do. Thanks very much.” That window ought to be turned out next week. Don't know what I'm going to put in it, though. Unless it's a display of my own cough mixture. Moffatt's Mixture for Coughs and Colds. One and six a bottle. That chap Pinkling is guilty, all right. That photograph of him in the paper this morning is enough. You can tell by the expression on his face. Suppose he got enraged with her and just shot her. Don't say that she wasn't the kind of girl who'd aggravate any man. Blue Band Pharmacies, Limited. Cheaper. “I'll have coffee and sandwiches, please.” “Coffee and sandwiches for me, too, please.” “Oh, I don't like this shop, somehow. Let us take the prescription to Mr. Moffatt's. He's reliable, you know.” “Yes, I love dear old Mr. Moffatt.” “Now don't let me have to tell you again about your

dusting, Ernest.” “Dear Sir, We have pleasure in enclosing cheque for one hundred and fifty pounds, representing the price obtained for your oil painting, less our usual commission.” Hundred and fifty. Wish I *could* get that. I'd be satisfied. Might get at least a hundred. Can't tell. Rather disappointed in the appearance of that new picture show. Thought it'd be a much grander affair. Very poor. That was funny, that story I read the other day about a girl being shown over a moving picture studio and asking how those slow-motion films were first thought of. I must tell it to Head. He'll laugh. “It was like this,” they told the girl: “the idea came from two Scotchmen reaching for their bill after dining at a restaurant.” . . .

He was panting by the time he had reached the summit of the hill, and he paused for a few moments until he had recovered his breath. His eyes travelled from the palely-shining tram-car lines to the opposite kerbstone, then to the electric-current standards and the copper wires which they helped to support above the car lines. He glanced at the white fences of the red brick bungalows on the other side of the street, their patches of lawn, and the bungalows themselves; to their red tile roofs and their red brick chimneys, like silent sentinels. Then he looked at the dark blue sky, and stood for a long time gazing at the shining yellow moon with a bite out of its side, and at the scintillating stars. The sight of the great sky and its luminaries calmed him, and he was filled with wonder that he had never felt so profoundly about them before.

. . . The old moon, he thought at length, as he continued to look at it. What a bright moon! Just shining up there. What a brilliant thing you are! And these clusters of stars deep in the blue. Winking and twinkling. Mysterious gems. Oh, I know — I know you're beautiful. That's what is so puzzling. There *is* this beauty. There *is* beauty in the world. . . .

He sighed, and after a while he walked on again.

But his head was buzzing with the exertion of his walk when he reached the silent moonlit space of Six Ways Cross, and the sounds of his footsteps followed slowly one upon another as he crossed the road and the tram-car lines, mounted the asphalt pavement outside the pharmacy, squeaked open the iron gate to the residence verandah, stepped on to the tiles, shut the gate, and paused on the mat while he felt in a trouser pocket for the door key.

The Yale lock on the door needed mending, and the key would not readily enter the little slot. But he had no patience with it, and tried to thrust it in by force. He frowned angrily as it obstinately defied him.

. . . Confound the thing! his thoughts went on. I'm too damned tired to be bothered with anything like this. Damn you! Go in. *Go* in! . . .

VII. His Child

The lock yielded at length to his angry force, and admitted the key to itself. He opened the door, entered the hall, and shut the door behind him. In the darkness he took off his hat and groped with it for one of the vacant pegs in the hall-stand. He could not find one, and impulsively jammed it on the table of the stand, against the jardiniere containing the fern in its pot.

. . . Oh, go somewhere, for goodness' sake, were the words in his mind. .

He struggled out of his overcoat, and tried with equal unsuccess to find a peg for that.

. . . Oh, put the thing on the chair, continued his thoughts. Or it can fall on the floor if it wants to. . . .

He swallowed a lump in his throat.

. . . Find my way upstairs. That's the first thing. . . .

He groped about with his hand outstretched until it felt the curtain hanging on one side of the hall archway. From there he felt the pineapple-like head of the banister. Carefully he felt forward with one foot towards the stairs until his shoe bumped the bottom step. His right hand on the banister, he walked very slowly up the stairs.

. . . Dead-dog tired, his mind went on. Hardly keep my eyes open. Just played out. Wish I was in bed. Am I near the top step? You can give your knee such a jerk if you're not careful. Lived all these years here and I don't know how many steps there are. Yes, there's still another one. And another. Wait a bit. Wait—a—bit——. No, I'm on the landing. Now mind that linen chest on the left here. You can catch yourself such a crack on the elbow with the corner of that blessed thing. Here's the wall right enough. That chest can't be far along here. No, farther along yet. Uh! There, I *thought* I'd bump into it. Damn the blasted thing. It sticks out so that you can't fail to hit it. Now where's the bedroom door? Wouldn't have thought I was so far along. Here, this is it. Where did I leave those matches? On the dressing table, I think. If I could put my hand on one of those blinds I'd run it up and let in some moonlight. It's no harder to find the matches, though. Here's the dressing table. Where are they? No, not there, nor there. No—no. Where else could I——? Here they are. Thought I left them here. That's right, spill half-a-dozen while you're getting out one. Do detest groping about like this in the dark. There, that's alright, anyhow. . . .

He turned the tap of the incandescent gas lamp, applied the lighted match to the mantle, and with a plop! the room revealed itself. He turned and looked at the double bed, with the clothes thrown back as he had left them when he had hurried downstairs to answer the telephone, and the pillow

with a dent in the middle of it where his head had lain.

. . . Well, he reflected, I'm back again. After all that walk. Jolly long way. I'm puffed out. . . .

He sat on the edge of the bed for a few moments; then he stood up again and began to unbutton and pull off his clothes.

. . . No good sitting down, he thought. I'm going to bed. Got a lot of sleep to make up. I'm too tired for anything. I just want to sleep. No, I'm not going to think, even. Too tired to think. Oh, damnation take that stud. Rolled under the chair, I think. Where is it? Can't see a sign of it. Not going to start looking for it now, anyway. It can go. I've got plenty more like it. There, you nearly ripped the back of your shirt, trying to pull it off too quickly. Where are my pyjamas? That's more to the point. Here they are. Yes, as cold as slabs of marble. Good thing my feet are warm. Suppose the sheets are frigid. I thought so. But I'll be asleep in a moment. What about the gas? Going to turn it out? I don't know. No. Don't think I will. Oh, that's absurd. I'll turn it out. Oh, I'll leave it in, I think. . . .

He dropped his head wearily on the pillow, pulled the clothes above his shoulder, and settled himself to sleep.

. . . Now there's going to be no fooling around, tossing about, continued his mind. I'm going to drop straight off to sleep. No use just lying awake here. Might as well be up as doing that. Going to make my mind a complete blank. Tired. Just tired out. Wonder did I put the chain on the front door? Don't remember it. Burglars could get in easily enough if they wanted to. Oh, I don't think burglars would choose a house facing Six Ways Cross. Don't think there'll be enough bread for breakfast unless I send out Ernest to get some. Forgot all about leaving a note for the baker to let us have an extra loaf. Ought to get more butter, too. Isn't much. Strange thing I never think of sausages for breakfast sometimes. Very fond of sausages. Get Ernest to buy me some. I could fry them right enough. Not sure about the gravy. That's the only thing. Don't like them without gravy. A little flour, I think, and then——. What was that? . . .

There was a knock on the bedroom door. With a nervous jerk he lifted his head and listened. The sound took him by surprise. Then it was repeated more loudly.

“Oh—yes,” he responded. “Who's that? Is that you——?”

“It's me—Naomi,” from the other side of the door.

. . . Naomi, repeated his mind. What can she want? What's the matter? . . .

“What do you want, Naomi?” he asked, raising himself on his elbow and his heart beginning to thump.

“Have you been to the hospital, father?”

He sat up in bed, and his heart thumped harder.

“Yes, I went there, dear,” he answered, rather indistinctly. He was trying to think clearly, and was only realising that his brain was confused.

“Was anything the matter?” asked Naomi, while he was still trying to collect himself.

“Wait a moment,” he temporised, as he threw over the clothes and swung out of bed. “I’ll tell you everything.”

. . . Died, continued his mind, as he worked himself into his dressing gown and tied the tasselled cord of it round his waist. Your mother. You poor child. No, neither did I. Your mother. I know, I know. Died. . . .

He walked over to the door and opened it. Naomi’s eyes met his. He noticed the brightness of her eyes, the bloom of her cheeks, the lustre of her brown bobbed hair in the light from the gas lamp in his room. He felt his love for her. He wanted to put his arms round her young body and kiss her lips.

“What was the matter at the hospital?” she asked, looking keenly at him. “Is mother—all right?”

As he answered, he was conscious more of the thudding of his heart and of his desire to embrace Naomi than of his words.

“It was very bad news they gave me, dear,” he said clumsily, looking earnestly at her. “It’s a terrible blow—for both of us.”

“What do you—*mean*—father? Was she any ——?”

He remained looking at her with his earnest eyes, and she continued to gaze at him.

. . . Oh Naomi, Naomi! were the words in his mind. Don’t you see? My poor child. Your mother is dead, dear. . . .

But he said nothing aloud.

“What is it, father?” urged Naomi, her cheeks growing crimson. “What has happened? You don’t mean that mother is *dead*?”

Impulsively he threw his arms round her and pressed her to him. For a moment he held her against him with all his strength. It satisfied his affection for her.

. . . I love you, dearest child, his thoughts went on, as he held her. I must love you now with all Florence’s love besides my own. Dead. Yes. . . .

He relaxed his clasp, and bent impulsively to kiss her. She drew back her head as though by instinct, but his lips were on hers before she could avoid him. When he had kissed her, her hands were raised against his chest, as if to push him away.

“But—*when* did mother die?” she asked, a little impatiently.

“I’m not certain about the time,” he said, trying to repress the feeling in him that he had kissed Naomi against her will. “It was some time this

morning—early.”

“Didn't they tell you at the hospital?”

“It was about quarter of an hour before I arrived. It must have been about half past three that she died.”

“But how did it happen? She was getting on so well.”

“Her heart failed, Naomi.”

“Isn't that unusual?”

“It happens sometimes.”

“But did you know that mother had a weak heart?”

“I had no idea.”

“Wouldn't the doctor have known?”

“I suppose he would have.”

“Well, why didn't he *tell* you?”

“I really don't know. I suppose there was no purpose in telling me.”

“Haven't you spoken to the doctor about it?”

“I'm afraid I haven't. I don't think he was at the hospital.”

“Don't you know whether he was?”

“Well, they didn't tell me so.”

“And you never asked them?”

He shook his head.

“And you never thought of telephoning him?”

He shook his head again.

She looked at him reproachfully for a moment. Then she asked:

“What did mother look like? Did she seem to have died peacefully?”

“I don't know, dear.”

“Didn't you see her?”

“No. I didn't want to.”

“And you didn't ask them about it at the hospital?”

“I'm afraid I never thought of it.”

“Did she say anything before she died?”

“I really don't know, dear.”

“You didn't ask them what were her last words?”

“No, I'm afraid I didn't. I was there only a short time. After the head-sister told me about it, I waited only to warm my hands, then I came straight home.”

“But you haven't been in long, father.”

“No, not very long. Did I wake you? Did you hear me come in?”

“Of course I heard you. I'd been lying awake all the time you were away. I couldn't understand why you didn't tell me what had been the matter as soon as you came upstairs.”

“I don't know why I didn't, my darling. I couldn't have thought what I

was doing, or I'd have gone to you straight away.”

“I was waiting so long. It seemed an eternity. I thought you must have stayed at the hospital a dreadfully long time. What were you doing if you weren't long at the place?”

“I was just going there—and coming back.”

“But—surely—you didn't walk?”

He nodded.

“Walked there and back?” she added. “*All* that way?”

He nodded again.

“Couldn't you have got a taxi?” she pursued.

“I suppose I could have. I decided I couldn't afford one.”

“And didn't you say that mother died only a quarter of an hour before you reached the hospital?”

He nodded once more.

Though his eyes no longer met hers, he could not help noticing that she bit her lip, and breathed more deeply.

. . . Poor child! were the words in his mind. What can I do to comfort you? What *can* I do now? She doesn't like my kisses. My moustache? I wonder. And perhaps my breath smells of tobacco. Must be that. . . .

“What did you arrange about the funeral?” Naomi was asking him now.

“I haven't thought about it, dear.”

“Didn't you say anything to them at the hospital?”

“No. It never occurred to me.”

“You haven't thought about it since?”

“I'm afraid I haven't.”

“You've done nothing?”

He shook his head.

They stood for a while facing one another, silent. He could hear her sucking in her lip, and her breathing was audible in her nostrils.

. . . What can I do for her? was the thought in his mind. How can I help her? She doesn't realise. . . .

“I suppose,” she said, at length, “the only thing to do is to go back to bed.”

“Yes, you must be cold standing here,” he agreed. “Try to go to sleep again,” he added, for want of something better to say.

“Oh, I shan't sleep any more.”

“I hope you will, though.”

“Well, good night, father,” she said, and turned to go across the landing back to her room.

“Good night, dear,” he returned.

The thought was in his mind to make some joke about its being really

morning, not night—after half-past five.

VIII. His Memories

But he just watched her until she reached her door, then shut his own door, paused with his hand on the knob, relinquished it, walked across the carpet, and sat on the edge of the double bed.

. . . What *can* I do? continued his thoughts. Won't let me comfort her. Won't let me do anything. No good: I'm not going to think. Going to sleep.

. . .

He swung himself into the bed, and pulled up the clothes.

. . . Now how about that light? he reflected. Am I going to leave it in? No, I'll put it out this time, I think. Yes, I will. Oh, it won't hurt for it to be left in. . . .

He sighed as he slid down between the sheets, laid his head again in the dent of the pillow, and closed his eyes.

. . . Now I *must* go to sleep, his mind went on. No use whatever trying to think about anything now. "You've done *nothing*?" "I'm afraid I haven't." "I decided I couldn't afford one." "*All that way*?" "Quarter of an hour before you reached the hospital." "*Done nothing*?" "But —surely—you didn't walk?" "Couldn't you have got a taxi?" You see, there's this seven hundred pounds that I owe the bank. Of course you don't know about that. And you don't realise how the business has gone down. Twenty-five pounds last week. Doctor's fees. Operation. Hospital's charges. Oh, do go to sleep. *I don't want to be thinking about all this.* Well, I don't know. But he may have charged seven or eight shillings. "*Nothing*?" I'm going to sleep. "No, I didn't want to." I didn't want to see her. No, no, no. I'm glad I didn't see her. Oh, go to sleep. . . .

He was trying to obliterate from his mind a picture of a woman's body, whose face he would not recognise, lying on a very white bed. It lay stiff, still. The eyes were sunken, lifeless, lustreless. He knew that the body was cold. . . .

After a while he succeeded in stemming the flow of words in his brain, and dozed. But as he dozed the picture of the woman's cold, still body on the bed never entirely left him.

Suddenly he was awakened out of his doze by the feeling of his eyes being wet, by a warm trickling down his cheeks, and by the pillow being moist. And the picture of that prostrate, stiffened body was more vivid than before.

. . . Oh, go away, were the words in his mind. What's the good of this? . . .

He blinked his eyes and wiped them with the back of his hand. His lips were set in a firm thin line. His heart was thumping again. He swallowed, and blinked his eyes once more, for there was still moisture in them. There was a pain in his head now as he tried to suppress something inside him that wanted to burst his ribs to free itself. His heart as it throbbed and throbbed seemed weighted down. The moisture on the pillow seemed to be increasing where his head lay.

. . . Oh, such rot, going on like this, his thoughts continued. Don't know what use it is. . . .

Impatiently he turned over and lay on his other side.

. . . Oh, sleep—go to sleep, his mind went on. You can't *do* anything. We got on so well together. We were such friends. Oh, I loved her. She was such a loving woman. She was always looking after me and wondering what she could do for me. She knew I had to work hard in the shop—long hours—and she was always trying to make the work less laborious for me. We were devoted to one another. It was true love. The sweetest woman that ever breathed. I wasn't good enough for her. I know that. She saw in me qualities that weren't there. But I didn't appreciate her as I should have done. Angelic darling. Oh, where are you? You've gone above me, far beyond me, where I can never reach you. I'll never see you again. Whatever shall I do without you, loved one? I don't know why I go on like this. Only making me morbid. Oh, I loved her. . . .

He groaned and turned over again. But the tears still ran from his eyes, and in his mind there was the picture of a long room with a large bay window at one end. It was night and the room was lighted by a circle of lamps suspended from the middle of the ceiling. At a piano near the window a girl of nineteen sat playing. He stood beside her, turning the music leaves. His face was very red, and blood was throbbing in his temples. His hands were trembling. He was itching to touch her, but felt that he dared not. Now she had stopped playing, and he was seated beside her on the music stool, his arm round her waist, and he was kissing her. "I've been longing to tell you for weeks," he was saying in a nervous, shaking voice. "I'm so glad I've done it. I love every bit of you, Florence. I love everything about you." And now she was saying in tears, "Oh, John, I've loved you since I first saw you. I feel I've always loved you."

He could not restrain his emotion as this memory held his brain. He allowed himself to cry.

And now he could see her in bed with the tiniest baby sleeping beside her. And he was bending down and kissing her and kissing the child. And he was saying, "I love you, my darling!" Again he was seeing her from the deck of the *Orata*. He could just discern her among the great crowd on the

wharf. She was waving her handkerchief to him. Then she was turning and disappearing among the crowd. He could not see her again, and the *Orata* was being backed farther out into the stream.

He had a choking sensation in his throat, and he writhed between the sheets as this picture filled his mind.

. . . Oh, Florence, Florence! continued his thoughts. Where are you? If I could only speak to you——! If I could just hear your voice again——! Oh God! she's not here——she's not here, I tell you! . . . Damn this blasted world! Oh, it's not made for happiness! I hate the world! I hate God, or whatever you like to call Him! Oh—sacrilegious—profane—cuts no ice with me. Can't help that. . . . Florence, Florence! No use repeating her name. But it's you, dear, I want! . . .

The first tram-car of the day had thundered past Six Ways Cross before his weariness of brain and body let him fall asleep.

Chapter Six

I. The Weight in His Heart

The first thing he was conscious of when he awoke again was the heaviness of his heart. It was as though there were lead within his breast. And there was still in his brain the picture of that cold, stiff form prostrate on the white sheet of the bed. There seemed nothing he could do to make that mental picture go, and he tried just to take no notice of it. He knew he ought to look at his watch, but he wanted just to lie and indulge himself in a ruminating mood. At length he exerted himself to see the time, and got a fright.

. . . Half past eight! he reflected. Had no idea. Bother its being so late. There, I expect Ernest's been in and had the blessed shop open for half-an-hour. If customers come they'll be kept waiting. Suppose I must get up at once. There's a lot to be done. Yes, get up. Oh, I must get up. Rouse yourself. Ah, dear, dear, dear! Well, I must get up—really. . . .

He yawned and stretched, and swung himself out of bed. As he struggled into his slippers and his dressing gown, his thoughts went on:

. . . Shop been open *half-an-hour!* I've never been so late. What will people think? Be quick . . .

But the weight in his heart made him want to ponder instead of hastening to the shop. He wanted to brood. And in that state of mind to hurry through the routine of his toilet was impossible.

In the bathroom he forgot to brush his teeth, and found it difficult to recollect when he was ready to shave whether he began on his right cheek or his left. As he shaved and washed there were pictures rising in his mind, one merging into another, of Florence and he laughing with their host and hostess on departing from a house at which they had attended a whist drive; he had made a joke about not having won the booby prize, and they were all very jolly about it; then he was at the theatre with Florence, and they were both laughing heartily with the rest of the audience at some comedian's sallies; then it was after the theatre, and Florence and he were talking about the play with great enthusiasm; and then it was at the breakfast-table, and they were exchanging recollections of funny lines out of the play; then it was a night of a whist drive held in the drawing-room, over the shop; and the room was filled with jolly people talking and laughing; and then it was at the supper table at midnight in the dining-room, and so many compliments were being passed to Florence on the deliciousness of her sandwiches and cakes; and she was giving recipes to

importunate women-folk for the making of articles equally delicious; and he was feeling so proud of Florence but never telling her so.

While these pictures occupied his mind, there was an insistent urging in him to hurry down to the shop. It was getting on for *nine* o'clock! But instead of being hurried, he was goaded at length to reflect:

. . . Why the dickens do I worry myself about the shop?—if I don't *care* about it that much? Well, the answer to that is clear enough: no shop, no money coming in . . .

It stopped at that for a few moments. Then his thoughts went on:

. . . And if no money: what then? Well—eventually—no food. And then what? Well, die of starvation, that's all. Simply there would no longer be Mr. J. J. Moffat. Nothing worse than that . . .

There was another pause in his reflections until they continued:

. . . Well, what would it matter? What odds? No, it wouldn't matter . . . Oh, don't go on thinking rubbish like this. Got Naomi to consider. Yes, of course. There's Naomi. . . .

The weight in his heart seemed heavier than before by the time he had returned to the bedroom.

As he pulled on his clothes there were pictures in his brain of Florence arranging her hair before the dressing-table mirror; of her holding hair-pins between her lips and taking them as she required them; and of her adjusting her blouse and setting it right around the neck; and of her fastening the front of her blouse with a brooch. He swallowed a lump in his throat as he stood before the dressing-table mirror adjusting his collar, and out of the tail of his eye seeing the silver-plated jewel case wherein that brooch lay, and the silver-plated tray containing hair-pins, which stood below him. He tried to take no notice of them, nor of the picture in his mind of himself sneaking into the breakfast room and putting that jewel case and that pin tray on her plate on the morning of her birthday; but his thoughts continued:

. . . Oh goodness! Me go on living here? Wouldn't *dream* of it! Oh, wouldn't entertain the idea for a second. I'm going to be off out of this place. . . .

And the weight in his heart made him sigh.

In his mind he could see Florence in front of the wardrobe, holding two dresses towards him. Which would he rather that she wore? H'm! H'm! He was pretending to make a close scrutiny of them, and then he was making his choice, and she was agreeing with his taste, and was hanging the rejected garment back in the wardrobe.

He was conscious now of the cash-box in a corner of that wardrobe, where it reposed every night, and from where he took it to the shop every

morning. He felt a dislike for that wardrobe, and there was in him a shrinking from the routine of taking the cash-box out of it. He did not want to go near the wardrobe. Indeed he didn't want to be in the room longer than he could help. He wanted to get away from these surroundings. He felt a loathing towards them. But these feelings, though he noted them, did not rouse him from his brooding state of mind, nor make him hurry. And when he was finished dressing, he did not hesitate to go to the wardrobe and take the cash-box out of it.

But when he had left the room, crossed the landing, descended the stairs, and was in the dispensary, he could still feel on the back of his hand the soft caress of a frock it had brushed against.

Sunshine streamed through the upper pane of the dispensary window. It cheered him, for the air smelt cold. Quietly he set the cash-box down on the marble portion of the dispensary bench, and noticed candle grease at the other end of the bench, near the telephone. It seemed hard to believe it was not ages instead of only six hours ago that that grease had been dropped. He scraped it off with a spatula and dropped it into the waste box. Then he slowly wiped the knife and returned it to its rack.

He walked to the back of the glass counter. Ernest was dusting the top of it, and removing the articles displayed thereon to do so.

“Good morning, Ernest!” said Mr. Moffatt; and Ernest nodded and half smiled and half raised a finger towards his forehead, then went on dusting.

. . . He's a good lad, reflected Mr. Moffatt, pleased to see the work being done. Where's the paper? . . .

“Is the paper round there?” he asked the boy.

“Haven't seen the paper this morning, sir,” mumbled Ernest.

. . . Funny, thought Mr. Moffatt. Suppose it can't have come. . . .

But he did not feel irritated at the apparent non-delivery of the paper, and did not have any suspicions about Ernest's having spirited it away. Instead he walked as usual to the shop entrance, and surveyed for a while the wide space of Six Ways Cross, with its people, its motor-cars, its occasional trams, and its horse-drawn carts and vans, all moving in the brightness of the winter sun. He sighed as he turned away, and would not entertain an idea that something in him had expected the appearance of Six Ways Cross to have changed since he had last looked at it in the light of day. It was too irrational for him to be the slightest bit surprised that it was exactly the same.

. . . Must get my breakfast, I suppose, he reflected, as he returned to the dispensary. . . .

He fastened the cash-box in the locker under the desk, told Ernest to keep an eye on the shop and announce to him the arrival of customers, and went

out of the dispensary into the kitchen. The gas stove appeared to him a forlorn object set in the chimney corner: a body with no spirit to inhabit it and make it an instrument of life. The sight of it made him feel again the weight in his heart. The rashers of bacon which he cut seemed to him poor, weak things, unwilling to be eaten and he not caring whether he ate them or not; still he laid them in the frying pan, and placed the pan on a lighted jet of the stove.

. . . Lot of silly rubbish, getting these ideas into my head about not eating and not living, he was at length roused sufficiently to reflect as he put a small kettle of water on the stove for his tea. Of course I want to live. "Hate the world"—"Hate God." Oh, of course I never really meant *that*. Forgive me. Of course I didn't. Didn't know *what* I was saying. I was just tired. Wonder is Naomi up? Wonder is she feeling all right? Perhaps she's up and has had her breakfast. Those would be her plates there on the table. Not mine. Suppose she couldn't sleep. Poor child! I'll turn these rashers over. They're done on one side. Then there's only that kettle—if it'd only boil. Turn the jet lower, I think, under this pan. . . .

But he felt very lonely as he stood in front of the stove, the gas jets roaring and the bacon rashers all a-sizzle.

When he entered the breakfast-room with his bacon and his tea-pot he looked beyond into the sitting-room to see Naomi in a chair by the window reading the newspaper. The table had a white cloth on it, and butter, marmalade and bread, and a cup and saucer, a plate, and a knife for him.

"Good morning, Naomi!" he said quietly, as he set his bacon and tea-pot in his place.

She lowered the paper, returned "Good morning, father!" watched him seat himself at the table, then went on reading.

. . . Well, she's had her breakfast all right, he reflected as he reached for the bread and cut himself a slice. And she's laid for me. Doesn't usually do that. Dear little girl. She wants to look after me now. I won't say anything to her. Don't suppose she feels inclined to talk. I won't disturb her. Evidently she's not going to school this morning. Of course she feels that she can't. . . .

He began to eat his bacon, and his thoughts went on against the dark background of his brooding state of mind:

. . . So that's where the paper is. She must have gone into the shop before Ernest came, and got it. Suppose she won't keep it much longer now. Of course she's never seen me reading it at breakfast. She's always left for school before I begin breakfast. Nicest bacon I've tasted for a long time. Something has to go right sometimes, I suppose. . . .

"You didn't want the paper, did you, father?" inquired Naomi.

He looked hastily towards her.

“No, no, dear. Oh, no, no!” he declared. “You go on reading it.”

He went on eating his bacon, but soon the thoughts were in his mind:

. . . I *don't* want the paper. She can have it as long as she wants it. I'm quite satisfied to be without it. . . .

And he tried to feel only how excellent was the bacon, and not let himself be so conscious of the burden that weighted his heart. But it was not long before his thoughts were proceeding:

. . . Simply can't bear to go into that kitchen every morning now and cook my own breakfast. I won't have another meal here like this. This is positively the last. Well, I'll just have to go to the hotel. I'll go there for every meal. Shop'll have to be closed, that's all. Must have some little change, some little brightness, during the day. . . .

After which decision he sighed and went on eating.

When he had almost finished his breakfast, Naomi slowly folded the newspaper, rose with deliberation, and walked into the breakfast-room.

Mr. Moffatt saw her coming, and tried to think of something to say to her that would seem natural.

“I suppose you're not going to school to-day, Naomi?” he managed to ask her.

She laid the neatly-folded newspaper on the table, and sat in the chair drawn up at her place.

“No, of course not,” she answered.

There was a desire in him to look at the newspaper. But he felt that Naomi had come to speak to him, and he was nervous during the pause before she began.

“You know, father,” she said abruptly, “I feel very much that mother should be—cremated.”

. . . Cremated! . . .

And there was a picture in his mind of fire—of a coffin containing a white human body being pushed by two men into a furnace. He frowned and inwardly shrank from the picture. In a way he could feel the burning heat of the flames. But he tried to be fair to Naomi, repressed his feelings, and calmly continued to spread butter on bread.

“What could have put *that* idea into your head, my dear child?” he asked.

Naomi blushed.

“It's nothing that's been put into my head. I think it's the only reasonable way to dispose of a dead body.”

He felt something like choking in his throat as he heard her say “dead body.” The words pierced his feelings as a knife might have pierced his flesh. He felt—and tried not to feel—irritated.

He just shook his head as he worked the butter like ointment over the bread's surface.

Naomi leaned further forward.

“But—what *are* you in favour of?” she asked. “Do you stick to the idea of burial?”

He twisted uneasily in his chair and kept his eyes on his buttered bread. Her eyes were fixed on his face; but he would not look up at her.

. . . *Cremation or burial!*—what can be the matter with her? he reflected unhappily. What is she worrying about? . . .

“I'm not thinking about it at all, Naomi,” he said in a low voice. “There'll just be the funeral—and then—I must just try to forget about it.”

Naomi's eyes brightened.

“But—father—you must think about what you're going to do with the body.”

“For *goodness'* sake don't use that word ‘body’!” he burst out in controlled annoyance.

. . . Oh, I don't mean it like that, his thoughts went on. I'm not angry about it. She's young. She just doesn't realise. . . .

“What word *can* I use?” returned Naomi.

“Doesn't matter, dear. What were you *saying*?”

“I've thought it all out, father. We can telephone to Darter, the undertaker, and arrange with him to have the—have mother, if you like, taken by train to Melbourne. To-night if necessary. There isn't a crematorium in Sydney. Then you could go by the same train to Melbourne, attend at the crematorium, and return the same day. This is Friday. You'd leave by the express to-night, you see, be in Melbourne to-morrow, and return by the express leaving Melbourne at five o'clock in the evening. You'd be back here on Sunday morning.”

As he listened to Naomi's voice he felt he was being caught in a whirlwind and being spun round giddily and quite beyond his own control. He felt if he said anything it would be something unkind. And he had no wish to say anything unkind. His thoughts just went on:

. . . No—no—no. Uh! Never! . . .

And he began very slowly to press his knife into his buttered bread at little intervals across to make fingers. He felt bitterly the weight in his heart.

“You could get Mr. Kensal to look after the shop,” Naomi was saying. “He's sure to be able to come. He hasn't many engagements, has he?”

Mr. Moffatt had the feeling of a net being drawn more and more tightly round him, and he struggled to free himself. But he did not wish to show that he felt that net.

In answer to Naomi's question he just shook his head.

"Well—will you ring him up, father?" the girl pursued.

He bit a piece off one of his bread fingers, but he had no appetite for it. He felt very lonely. And he felt that very sullenly he was fighting a battle. He wanted to remain in his mood of dark contemplation, and Naomi with her plans was trying to jerk him out of it and make him think briskly. Subconsciously he was determined not to be jerked out.

"You'll do that, won't you, father?" continued Naomi. "And ring up Darter about the train to Melbourne, and so on? I think the sooner you telephone to him the better."

He toyed with the bread he was holding and shook his head as he answered softly, "No, no."

"You *won't* have mother's body cremated?" Naomi pressed.

He felt miserable.

"No, dear, of course not," he said, and thought:

. . . Why do you bother like this? . . .

While he wished she would go away. He detested this discussion.

"Now, father—why?"

He tried to think why. But his brain did not seem clear enough.

"Oh—no—wouldn't—wouldn't dream of such a thing."

"That's no reason."

He bit off another piece of bread.

"Don't you know," persisted Naomi, "that cremation is so much more hygienic than interment?"

He slowly chewed the bread in his mouth.

. . . More hygienic, repeated his thoughts. . . .

And in his mind there was a picture of the Claverley cemetery.

"The body—the remains—are burnt, and there are just the ashes left," Naomi continued. "There's none of this bother about a grave—a grave that smells very often, and is most unhealthy to go near."

In his mind he could see that furnace again, and the coffin containing the white human body being pushed into the roaring, licking, hungry fire. Inwardly he shuddered. But to outward appearances he just dabbed another finger of bread round the plate so that the butter on it gathered up crumbs. He felt a tightness round his head. His brain seemed very dull. He just knew that he shrank from those imaginary flames and the picture of the coffin going to meet them.

. . . Never! was the word that persisted in his mind. . . .

"Father," said Naomi, at length, "you haven't given me any reason why you don't want to do as I say. I want mother's body to be cremated. I've thought of it all this morning. What have you against cremation?"

There was still the picture in his mind of the coffin being wrapped up quickly by the flames, and the white body inside it being fast gone for ever. Then he could see alternatively a coffin being lowered into a grave very slowly.

“Weren't you ever taught about the—the resurrection of the dead?” he asked, frowning and looking up from his plate, but still not meeting the gaze of Naomi's eyes.

“What has that to do with it?” asked Naomi.

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Everything,” he said, and was still very unhappy.

He could see in his mind the Claverley cemetery full of bodies lying peacefully under the earth.

“Do you mean to tell me, father, that you think that a body buried in the ground is some day going to be raised up and made to live again?—that it isn't going to rot and decay, and be eaten by worms and vermin? It's just a matter of whether you're going to have mother's body eaten in the course of years by scavengers or consumed in the course of a few hours by fire.”

“Don't go on like that, dear,” he pleaded, controlling himself with difficulty. “I can't bear to think of your mother being burnt—cremated.”

“It isn't mother who is to be burnt. It's mother's body. You don't think that worn-out old body is mother, do you?”

He swallowed a lump in his throat.

“Don't talk like that, Naomi—please,” he said, blinked away some moisture in his eyes, and tried to seem occupied in eating another finger of bread.

Naomi bit her lip and tapped the table impatiently with her hand.

“You're so—you're so obstinate, father,” she declared. “I can't get you to use reason. You're a most *unreasonable* man.”

He sighed, and she went on:

“You *are*, you know, father. I can't help telling you. And you're very narrow in your ideas. You don't know it; but you are. You're shut up in this shop—I know you can't help that—but you don't see enough of the world. You don't know all that is going on outside. You don't get into touch with new ideas. You're just wrapped up in your shop—and yourself. You are, father.”

Her face was red, and his face was red and becoming redder as he tried not to seem hurt by what she said. As he gave no answer, she continued with more feeling:

“You never get out among people like I do. You never think deeply about things. You're a mass of prejudice. You don't really think at all. You're just content to stay in your old grooves, with your old ideas, your old ways of

doing things. You never try to evolve, to make yourself better, to make your mind broader, to think more deeply, to be a nobler soul. You're satisfied just to be what you were born. The joy of using your mind, of thinking clearly and freely—you know nothing about that. I know you don't. You know nothing about the glory of serving humanity, of the great ideal of service. You're cramped—stunted—father.”

. . . Service—cramped—stunted! echoed his mind. . . .

Mechanically he chewed his bread, and swallowed it convulsively when it was only half masticated, so that it seemed to stick in his chest. Naomi's words bewildered him. His brain seemed too numbed by their suddenness to piece together a defence of himself. And he felt that a lot of what she said might be true.

“But I suppose it's no use talking to you, father,” she concluded, leaning back from the table again. “You take no notice of what I say. I might as well speak to a wax model. You're set on having mother's body buried, and having a long funeral, and everybody in crape, and everything ugly and woeful and mournful. Oh, how I hate all that performance! *I won't wear crape!*”

“I'm very sorry, Naomi, dear,” he found the opportunity to say; and with the picture in his mind of black vehicles drawn by black horses and driven by men in black clothes and black tall hats, felt depressed to the last degree.

“Still, if you're going to *have* all that performance,” proceeded Naomi, “there are a lot of things that will have to be done. I suppose you'll have the funeral start from here?”

Somehow he had a feeling of being crushed. “I suppose so,” he answered, and could see the hearse starting down the street from the front door.

“And you'll have a lot of mother's friends and your own friends here?”

He drew in a deep breath, which made him feel less crushed.

“Yes,” he agreed, “I expect so.”

He could see the sitting-room full of people talking.

“So that you'll have to have the house cleaned out—thoroughly. Better get Mrs. Harris in. Send Ernest out for her.”

“Yes, I think I will.”

. . . Wonder what will she charge? was the question in his mind. . . .

“Have you telephoned to Darter, the undertaker, yet?”

“No, not yet.”

“Well, you ought to, father, at once. He can have the body coffined and brought here. I suppose that's what you want.”

He nodded slowly.

“Yes, I suppose that *will* be best,” he assented, and felt utterly miserable.

“Have you sent a telegram to Aunt Brenda?”

“Not yet.”

“Or to Aunt Anne, or Aunt Susie?”

He shook his head.

“I was almost forgetting——” he began to explain.

“Really, father——! Well, *I*’ll send telegrams *myself*. And you’ll telephone to Mr. Darter, and send Ernest for Mrs. Harris?”

“Yes, I’ll do that right away, dear,” he promised.

. . . Yes, I *must* do that, he agreed in his mind. . . . But the weight in his heart seemed still heavier than before when he rose from the breakfast table and took the tea pot, his soiled plates and cup and saucer, and his knives and fork into the kitchen. He returned to the breakfast-room to take off the table cloth, shake the crumbs from it, and put it in the dinner-waggon drawer. But already Naomi had shaken off the crumbs from the cloth and was folding it.

“Oh, thanks so much, Naomi,” he acknowledged. “You needn’t have bothered.”

. . . I know she’s wanting to help me, he reflected. Poor child! . . .

She had thrown the paper on to one of the chairs. He saw it there but left it. The weight in his heart made him so that he did not care whether he read it or not. . . .

II. His Importance

It was three o’clock in the afternoon of the following day—Saturday—that Mr. Moffatt, having said good-bye to Naomi, Mrs. Enslor, Mrs. Kessendon, and Mrs. Berrystone in the sitting-room, took his hat from the hall-stand, and opened the front door for the plump form of Mr. Kessendon and the tall, lank figure of Mr. Albert Head to pass out. He followed them and shut the door behind him.

His heart was throbbing with excitement as he turned on the door mat, then walked through the iron gate in the verandah railing which Mr. Head solemnly held open for him. Though he affected not to do so, he noted the crowd of small boys gathered on the pavement in front of the house, and the heads peeping beyond the doorway of Mr. Rondon’s, the tailor, next door, and Mrs. Skerry’s, the confectioner, next but one; the black hearse with its draped glass sides, standing so still against the kerb just beyond the house; the black mourning coach drawn up just opposite the house; Mr. Darter, the undertaker, waiting with a noble mien by the coach door; and the three cabs drawn up behind the coach.

. . . Old Mr. Archibald in that first cab, he reflected musingly as he walked through a lane kept between two flanks of peering and whispering small boys by Mr. Darter and Mr. Head. Can't see who's in the other cabs. .

He could almost feel the eyes of the boys and the others who watched him cross the pavement to the mourning coach. And he had an idea that they were seeing what he looked like in his sorrow. He occupied the chief place in a multitude of minds. The chief mourner!

. . . Lot of nonsense, all this fuss, he could not help thinking. What are they all so inquisitive about? Stating like this. Like to send them all about their business. Oh, I don't feel that way about them. . . .

“You get in first,” he said to Mr. Kessendon, as they stood outside the door of the coach. He felt generous in offering the privilege of prior entry, and could have smiled kindly as he did so, but an instinct warned him that the spectators would misinterpret that smile and think he was not feeling sorrowful. So he spoke sternly and with beetled brows.

“Go along, Head,” he added, when the coach had swayed to the entrance of the stout, tubby figure of Mr. Kessendon. “You get in next.”

He felt superior and important as he thus ordered Mr. Head. Mr. Head obeyed, and the coach swayed again. Then, with the apparent assistance of Mr. Darter's hand under his elbow, Mr. Moffatt mounted the step and climbed into the gloomy interior of the swaying vehicle.

Mr. Head and Mr. Kessendon stood up so that he might have any position he chose.

“Where are you going to sit, old man?” asked Mr. Head, his face eloquent of inquiry.

“Anywhere—all the same to me,” declared Mr. Moffatt agreeably. He felt warmly towards his friends for accompanying him on this painful mission. “I'll sit here, if you like,” he decided, and took a corner seat on the off side of the coach. Some spirit in him that he declined to listen to reminded him that from that seat he would get the best view of the Blue Band Pharmacies' shop as the funeral passed it.

Mr. Head sat next him: Mr. Kessendon sat opposite to him. He could hear the wheels of the hearse begin to grind over the street surface, and a moment later the coach started. He looked across through the window next to the kerb and watched the excited movements of the small boys as they followed the procession a few yards before they found more interesting pastimes to occupy them.

“Terrible—these youngsters—aren't they?” observed Mr. Head, smiling.

“Yes, they must see everything,” agreed Mr. Kessendon, smiling also, and pursing his lips.

Mr. Moffatt smiled grimly and nodded his head. Then he turned to look through his own window.

. . . Very decent of old Archibald to come to the funeral, his thoughts went on, as he looked at the shops being passed. Never dreamt of his coming. Wonder who's in the other two cabs? Oh, look there! Slade's have drawn the blind over their window. I had no idea they'd be so decent as to do that. And, there! Marjelly's actually shut his shop door. Tch, tch! And it's not as if I'd ever been particularly friendly towards them, either. Miss Tusheem, too. She's drawing down *her* blind. Tch, tch, tch! . . .

He felt a rush of affection for these fellow trades-people who showed him marks of their respect. Tears moistened his eyes. But he also felt glad that there were three cabs in the funeral. Just the mourning coach would have seemed too short a procession to merit so much attention being paid to it.

He noted the number of people, some of whom he knew as customers in the shop, who stopped in their walking along the pavement, and watched the funeral pass. If they were men they bared their heads. He wondered vaguely if the coach interior was too dark compared with the sunlit street for pedestrians to see his face. He maintained the sorrowful expression on it.

He felt proud when he glanced up at the houses over the shops and observed heads projected from several of the windows. He would not admit to himself that he felt proud, but only that he was full of sorrow. His thoughts went on:

. . . Don't know whether I was right in closing the shop for the day. Florence wouldn't have cared a scrap. She'd know it was no disrespect to her if I'd opened again to-night. Such a terribly bad thing for trade to send the whole day's customers down to the Blue Band shop. Too late now. What I could have done—I could have added a line to the card I put on the door to say that urgent prescriptions could be obtained at the house. I wonder could I do that when I get back? . . .

“Do you mind if I smoke, Moffatt?” asked Mr. Head, suddenly, as the coach slowly swayed on to the accompaniment of the grinding of the wheels and the measured thuds of the horses' hoofs. Mr. Head had made himself comfortable by sliding farther down in the seat and crossing his long legs.

“No—no—not in the slightest,” Mr. Moffatt assured him, and reflected:

. . . Oh, I *don't* mind. Where's the harm? Why shouldn't he smoke if he wants to? . . .

“Will you take one?” invited Mr. Head, as he held towards Mr. Moffatt a case of cigars.

Mr. Moffatt shook his head, and smiled—a little.

“Not for me, thanks,” he declared.

“You will, won't you, Mr. Kessendon?” Mr. Head urged.

Mr. Kessendon glanced at Mr. Moffatt, but Mr. Moffatt was looking through the window.

“Well—thanks—I believe I will,” Mr. Kessendon said, and leaned forward and accepted a cigar.

Mr. Moffatt reflected as the smoke hung in the atmosphere of the coach:

. . . Nice cigars. Oh, I'll have my pipe when I get home. I don't really want to smoke now. It *wouldn't* look good. Oh, not that I mind that. No, it isn't that. I just don't want to smoke, that's all. . . .

“Going ahead very fast—Claverley,” declared Mr. Head, under the influence of the cigar, as he pointed to new shops that were being erected. “When I first began to come to Claverley,” he added, addressing Mr. Kessendon, “do you know, this street was three-fourths houses. Now nearly the whole of it's shops. Sprung up in no time.”

“Yes, they're run up very quickly,” assented Mr. Kessendon.

In Mr. Moffatt's mind there was a picture of what he imagined the Blue Band Pharmacies' shop looked like. The funeral was now drawing near it. He ignored the way his heart beat faster as the shop gradually came into sight. He would not move a muscle to see it more quickly than he would do in the course of the movement of the coach towards it.

“I heard a funny story to-day,” Mr. Head was saying to Mr. Kessendon, whose mouth relaxed into a gentle smile at the mention of the words. “Young Levinsky asks his mother at the dinner table for more vinegar. ‘You mustn't take so much vinegar, Mosey,’ warns Mrs. Levinsky. ‘Dot vos bad for your constitution.’ ‘No, no,’ says Mr. Levinsky, ‘let him haf all he wants. If you stunt his growth he can ride on der trams all his life at half-price.’ ”

And Mr. Head looked significantly at Mr. Moffatt, then went on smoking his cigar. Mr. Kessendon smiled broadly, his eyes twinkled, and he nodded his head. Then he turned his eyes towards Mr. Moffatt. Mr. Moffatt did not appear to have heard the story, and continued to look out of his window, his face grave and stern. But in his mind there were the words:

. . . If you stunt his growth—ride on der trams all his life at half-price. Well, that's not bad. All his life at half-price. What do they say up there? Yes, Blue Band Pharmacies, Limited. What's that? Greatest—Chemists—in—the—World. Well, well! Tch, tch, tch! *I never*. That beats the band. . . .

He was most excited as his eyes were fixed on the long signboard hung along the front of the street verandah fronting the two shops that the Blue Band Pharmacies had made into one. To outward appearance, however, the

existence of the premises of the Blue Band Pharmacy raised not the slightest interest in him, and his face, calm and grave, remained unchanged. But his reflections went on:

. . . Well, that's not such a grand window display. The Blue Band Cure for Colds. One shilling. H'm. Wonder how much they sell of that. Hallo! Two—three—five people at the counter. H'm. And I suppose this part is where they do their trade in tobacco and lending library and cameras and counter lunches. Four people in there, too, bijove. Mmmm! Blue Band Pharmacies, Limited, eh! Well, well, well! . . .

The sight of the bold display of the Blue Band Pharmacy and the brisk business being carried on at its counters depressed him, and his feelings were not relieved by Mr. Head's remarks:

“Great strides these Blue Band people are making. Opening shops in all the suburbs. Have you found they cause much difference to you, Moffatt?”

Mr. Moffatt coloured a little.

“Oh, of course,” he admitted, “they make a certain amount of difference to me.”

“Their prices are lower than yours, you know, Moffatt,” Mr. Head impressed on him.

“Yes, I believe they are in many things.”

“I should say in practically everything.”

Mr. Moffatt coloured still more.

“Yes, I believe their prices *are* very low,” he agreed.

“And their stuff's just as good,” pursued Mr. Head earnestly. “They buy in big quantities and save money on discounts. They're out to kill the small chemists, you know.”

Mr. Moffatt nodded his head and continued to peer out of the window at the shops and houses slowly passing by. Mr. Head went on contentedly smoking his cigar. Mr. Kessendon puffed at his cigar only at long intervals, and silently studied the passing scene through Mr. Moffatt's window.

Mr. Moffatt felt extremely unhappy.

At length the business district of Claverley was left behind, and there were only red brick bungalows with red tile roofs and terraces of painted houses with roofs of slate. The crunching sound of the iron tyres on the coach wheels as they revolved over the blue metal of the street and dipped into its ruts was continually evident to Mr. Moffatt's consciousness. Now and then he felt sure he could also hear the noise made by the cab wheels behind and by the hearse wheels a few yards in front. And in his low spirits he began to muse on the picture in his mind of that hearse grinding along so tardily, of its glass sides draped with black hangings, behind which the polished and nickel-plated dark oak coffin, and inside the coffin, the lid

firmly screwed down on it, the white human body. His imagination painted for him that white body being shaken by the vibration of the hearse passing over the street's uneven surfaces; he could picture it as he mused as being so stiff—and so dead.

. . . Oh Florence! his thoughts went on dully. That body *must* not be you. Where *are* you? Are you here with me? Are you just hovering above me and watching all that I'm doing? Eh? You're a rogue of a girl doing that. And just smiling at me, I suppose. Eh? Oh, you must think this old funeral's a silly farce. You do, don't you, dear! I don't care anything about that body in that wretched old coffin. It's you I want. Were you surprised to see Mr. Archibald here? He's a splendid old gentleman. And I suppose you've been able to see how good Naomi has been to me. She can't realise you're gone, you know, darling. And here, Kessendon and Head have been doing everything they possibly can for me. Oh, don't worry about me, darling. This old funeral will soon be at the cemetery, and Mr. Hetchings' service there will soon be over, then there's only the burial, and that won't take long. . . . Ah, dear, dear, dear! Oh, God! Oh, God! . . . Not that body. No, not that body. It's Florence I want. . . . The life. . . . If I knew she was happy, and she could be here with me. . . . I *don't know*. . . . Florence! . . . Oh, what's the use of going on like this? . . .

He sighed and his chest seemed filled with a great load that bore down and crushed all hope within him.

Mr. Head sat deep in his seat, his legs crossed, his cigar between his teeth. He scraped with his finger-nail a small mark on the leg of his trousers. Mr. Kessendon sat and looked steadfastly through the window. The wheels of the cabs, the wheels of the coach, and the wheels of the hearse went on crunching over the blue-metal roadway. . . .

Chapter Seven

I. His Refuge

That night Mr. and Mrs. Kessendon stayed with him and Naomi for tea. But they lived in a distant suburb and departed early to get back to it. Mr. Moffatt was not sorry when they went, for he was in no spirit to entertain them. He did not know what would have happened if it had not been for Naomi, who maintained most of the conversation. She spoke brightly of things connected with her school teaching that he had never heard her talk about before; and about the Service Society and the other organisations for which she worked. He was indeed most interested to hear about the Service Society, and especially about her lessons in lecturing for it; to hear that the society was seeking to inculcate by means of lectures and short talks a better spirit of service in people towards one another; and that she expected to be called upon to give little talks at meetings before long. He could not but feel proud of her. Apart from the conversation, Mr. Moffatt was chiefly conscious that Florence was not there and never would be there; and of the strange feeling of its being Saturday night and his not having to attend to the shop.

When their friends had left, he and Naomi sat for an hour in the sitting-room reading. Or he tried to read: first the morning newspaper, then Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, which he had read every year or so during the greater part of his life; but in neither did he find relief from the weight that loaded his heart: *Treasure Island* did not seem the same; and the news in the paper was not sufficiently interesting to distract his thoughts from other things.

Once he put his book down and after a while asked Naomi had she any ideas about a tombstone over her mother's grave. She replied that she wouldn't dream of having a tombstone erected. It would cost a lot of money, and was perfectly useless—served no purpose at all. Would she just have the grave left—just—just—without any inscription—anything at all? Yes, certainly. It was of no interest to her where that body was. But—what would people say? What would they think? She didn't care a scrap what they said or thought about it. . . .

Next morning, while he was dressing in the spare bedroom into which he had moved from the double bedroom; while he was having breakfast at the Royal Hotel across the road; and during the hour that the shop was open to business, he was looking forward with pleasure to the service at St. Timothy's at eleven o'clock. His feelings towards the prospective church

service were not so definite as to suggest words in his mind, but in an analysis of those feelings it would be found that he looked forward to being solaced. No matter how careless he had been in the past in his church devotions every Sunday, no matter how little he had thought about them, nevertheless in his grief and loneliness now the church represented to him peace and rest and comfort. Somehow in church he would find an influence that would be sympathetic to him, that would help him, cheer him, lighten his burden, and make him feel able to go on with his life again. Church suggested the presence of God; and in God was the explanation of all things in human life.

It was a rainy day. The sky was overcast with grey, spongy volumes of cloud, and a drizzle of thin rain had been descending since early morning. The surface of Six Ways Cross was a series of brown muddy puddles which the tyres of motor-cars splashed into and half emptied, and the falling rain soon filled again. The spouts from the guttering along the shop verandahs gurgled and sputtered as the water ran through them, rainy-day music to which the drip-drip from leaks in the gutterings lent an accompaniment. The tram-cars thundered past the Cross, their roofs glistening with rain, their painted woodwork discoloured with dampness, and their wheels dashing a fan of water from the stream between the rails and the rail guards.

Mr. Moffatt walked along the pavement towards St. Timothy's, a shiny, black umbrella held over his head, and his macintosh rustling noisily with his every movement. Umbrella'd figures were dotted along the street in which St. Timothy's stood, converging upon the church from opposite directions. There was no wind, and the bell in the tower of St. Timothy's did not seem to increase in sound and die away and increase again, but came to the ear regularly and with an even volume.

The uniform dong-donging of the bell suggested to Mr. Moffatt the steadiness and balance and quiet order in which he could find repose. The very monotony of the bell's tolling seemed to signify that calm wisdom and embracing sympathy which he needed to reassure him and to give him peace. The nearer he drew to St. Timothy's the more deeply he felt that here was his refuge, here his haven of rest. The heaviness in his heart seemed less wearisome and more sacred as he came towards the open gates and walked up the grass-bordered pathway to the porch. While, as he took off his macintosh, there was in him a feeling of satisfaction that the crape armlet round his coat sleeve could now be seen, there was also a feeling of reverence for St. Timothy's; and in his mind as he walked up the carpeted aisle towards his pew there were the words:

. . . The dear old church. God. House of God. God's children. Come unto

me all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. . . .

II. The Rain

When the service was over, rain was falling heavily, and most of the congregation preferred to wait under shelter until the downpour lessened.

But Mr. Moffatt was not one of them. He rustled himself loudly into his macintosh, excused himself through the mass of excitedly-chattering parishioners to the porch entrance, where he put on his felt hat as he impatiently scrutinised the dark sky, then opened his umbrella over him and sallied down the path to the gate. On the pavement he paused to inhale deep lungfuls of the rain-washed air, and reflected:

. . . I'm not going home yet. I'm going for a walk. Can't help the rain. It'll just *have* to rain. But I must go for a walk, or something 'll burst inside me. Come on. Off I go. . . .

He walked briskly up the shiny, wet pavement in the opposite direction to that of Six Ways Cross, the rain pouring with a sullen roar on his umbrella. He drew in full breaths as he proceeded. It seemed impossible for him to expand his lungs sufficiently. He felt he wanted more air and more air.

. . . Go towards the park, his thoughts went on. As good as anywhere. Nice and green. . . .

He sighed, and the load in his heart seemed very heavy.

. . . Ah, dear, dear! his reflections proceeded. *I* suppose there's something *wrong* with me. Dear, dear, dear! Ah dear! Tch, tch! . . .

He sighed again, and the rain continued to roar upon his umbrella and stream and drip from the edges of it.

. . . Come along, his thoughts flowed on. Shake up the pace. I've got a ton of energy to work off yet. . . .

His shoes descended into rain-filled depressions in the pavement and splashed the water out in a spray. He walked so fast that soon he was panting and had to slacken speed. His face bore an expression of melancholy earnestness, his brows were knitted in a frown, and his lips were tightly set.

. . . What—what—what's the *use* of it? demanded his mind at length as he trudged along through the rain. What's the good of it all?—when you sum it all up. What's the good of it to you? Where does it all lead to? Oh—oh—be bothered! I don't know—just don't know. But what's the—I mean where does it—what's the—the—the—*I* don't know. Doesn't matter. I don't mind. *I*'m wrong. There's something radically wrong with *me* to-day. Ah dear! . . .

The trees and plants in the gardens of the bungalows he passed wept rain from their leaves, and the gutters flushing the street brimmed with fast, muddy streams.

. . . Oh, I've got nothing against the church service, his thoughts continued. Well, what *have* I got against it? No, of course there's nothing. Nothing. Oh, I'm an unhappy devil. As miserable as a bandicoot. Whosh! That's a bit of rain in my face. Damn it! The thing is, it's such a gabble. Of course I've always thought that. Oh, I know the words are beautiful, and all that. It's just—I don't know. Must be that my nerves are very much upset. Glory be to the Father and to the Son—oh, it's all right. I don't know what I want. I'm a dissatisfied beggar. The whole thing has simply rubbed me up the wrong way this morning. That's all. Manifold sins and wickedness. No, I don't feel that way about myself. Miserable offenders. Oh, I know I shouldn't be in such a critical mind. I never seem to have thought so much about it before. Ah dear! . . .

He sighed again, and the rain continued to roar upon his umbrella.

. . . I suppose I'm wanting something that isn't to be had, he went on to reflect. I don't know what Hetchings would think of me going on like this. Wickedness—wickedness—there's so much about wickedness. I don't feel wicked. Oh, I suppose I'm wrong about that. Erred and strayed from thy ways——. Oh, somehow it just upsets me. I'm just too damnably critical this morning. What's the matter with me? Oh, I don't know—the whole thing is nothing but about sins and wickedness and straying from the way and about evil and penitence and misery. I can't help it. That's just the way I feel. I wish to goodness I didn't feel like that. Makes me feel such a wretched individual. It's not that I want to put myself against God or anything of that kind. Oh, I'm all wrong, I know. . . .

He was outside the entrance to the park now, and he squeezed himself through one of the turnstiles and walked along the pathway between green lawns and trees.

. . . Well, what did I expect to get at church? his mind proceeded after a while of looking round at the dripping trees, the forlorn-looking white football goal posts slightly askew and the glistening wet pavilion and grand-stand overlooking the playing field. What did I *think* I'd find in the service? Um-m-m! H'm-m-m! Well, I don't know. No, I don't know, I'm sure. Something. But I don't know. . . .

There was a sheet of water in the middle of the football ground, and pools in various parts of the lawns. He branched off on to a path that would take him right round the park eventually. The rain was lessening in its intensity, but its fall continued.

. . . And after him was Shammah the son of Agee the Hararite,

proceeded his thoughts. And the Philistines were gathered together into a troop where was a piece of ground full of lentils: and the people fled from the Philistines. And so on. Means nothing to me. Don't care a damn about the Philistines. Or Samuel, or David, or any of the rest of them. Not what I want. Ah dear, I suppose I'm a wicked sort of creature going on like this. Jehiel, and Azaziah, and Nahath and, Asahel, and Jerimoth, and Jozabad, and Ismachiah, and Miniamin and Kore the son of Innah—there's no end to them. Well, what *do* I want in church? What *do* I expect to get? Yes, there you are—I'm in the wrong; because I don't *know* what I want. Something — something. . . . I'm just wretchedly unhappy. That's all about it. I wish —. But there you are, I don't know what it is I wish. Better leave it at that. By next Sunday I'll probably feel better. You don't get anywhere with thinking. I don't, anyway. It doesn't make me any happier to be critical about the church. That's one thing certain. I'm just all upset. Everything's upset me. Just try to forget. That's the best thing. I suppose I'm that damned lonely. . . .

. . . Oh, I could go over to Head's place if I wanted to, he reflected after a while. He wants me to go whenever I can. But he's sure to have visitors to-day. I don't want to meet strange people. Expect Naomi will have left for Mosman by now. Said she was going to her friend's place there for lunch, since I was getting lunch at the Royal. . . .

He breathed deeply as he walked on; and the rain kept up its roar above him.

III. One Afternoon

On an afternoon several days later, Mr. Moffatt was standing before the desk in the dispensary, contemplating two letters he had received. At the same time there was present in his consciousness a prescription lying on the marble portion of the dispensary bench.

. . . Cheek of these people, he was reflecting. Blue Band Pharmacies, Limited, eh! We should like you to know that if at any time you feel inclined to dispose of your business, you may consider us as possible buyers. Huh! If you were to sell at any time within the next two months, we would be pleased to offer you £800 cash. We have no doubt that a rent for the premises satisfactory to us both could be arranged. If you should feel disposed to accept our offer, it would give us great satisfaction if you would stay on at the shop as manager of it. Never! But perhaps you would rather not remain at Claverley. I hardly think so. If it would help you to decide about our suggestion, we can assure you that there would be no difficulty in finding you a managership of one of our establishments in

some other suburb. And so on. Eight hundred pounds, eh! Well, well, I never! Uh!—wouldn't dream of selling for less than a thousand. Twelve hundred I ought to have. But there's that prescription. People will be calling for it soon. Of course the takings have gone down. If you looked at the figures for the last few months you wouldn't say the business was worth even eight hundred. But who's responsible for that? And now they have the impudence to offer to buy me out. Poof! . . .

He took the letter and pressed it on to the dusty spike file standing at the top of the desk.

. . . And I don't know what to do about this other letter, he went on thinking. Simpkins and Tayler. Unless I tell them to sell the thing for what they can. Couldn't realise my reserve of fifty pounds! Not fifty pounds. What can I get for it? They're waiting for my instructions. It means I have to be prepared to take *under* fifty pounds. Too utterly damned bad. . .

He heard footsteps in the shop, and appeared round the back of the glass counter to find the flushed, smiling face and the bright, shining brown small eyes of Mr. Hetchings, the rector.

“How *are* you, Mr. Moffatt?” asked Mr. Hetchings loudly, as he held his large, sun-burnt hand over the counter.

Mr. Moffatt smiled involuntarily, though he was not sure in himself whether he did or did not wish to see Mr. Hetchings, or whether he had anything he desired to say to him. He grasped Mr. Hetchings' hand, and they shook one another's warmly.

“Oh—ah—well, well—how are *you*?” inquired Mr. Moffatt, confused with Mr. Hetchings' unexpected appearance. He felt self-conscious before Mr. Hetchings, and as though he were about to be found out in a great wrong.

“I thought I must just call round to see how you were getting on,” Mr. Hetchings explained.

“Oh, it's very good of you, I'm sure,” declared Mr. Moffatt, And he did feel gratitude towards Mr. Hetchings. “Would you care to come round into the dispensary?” he invited. “I'm not so very busy.”

. . . That prescription, he reminded himself. . . .

“Well, I'm rather in a hurry,” said Mr. Hetchings, as he walked towards the narrow door at the side of the dispensary partition. “I mustn't stay long. And of course I don't want to take up your time. Though I suppose these people—what do they call themselves?—Blue Band Pharmacies, isn't it!—I suppose they make a difference to the amount of your business now, don't they?” he suggested as he entered the dispensary from the partition doorway while Mr. Moffatt entered it from the alleyway at the back of the counter.

"H'm, well of course they do," Mr. Moffatt admitted. "Sit down, won't you? I'm afraid that's not a very comfortable seat, but it's the only one I've got," and he waved Mr. Hetchings to the bent-wood, hard-seated chair in the middle of the dispensary floor.

"They sell their things very much cheaper, so I'm told," pursued Mr. Hetchings, as he sat down.

"Oh yes," nodded Mr. Moffatt, as if it was information to him, and thought:

. . . Go on. I don't mind. . . .

"I believe their things are just as good too," declared Mr. Hetchings. "They can *afford* to sell cheaper."

"Quite so," nodded Mr. Moffatt. He stood beside the desk, conscious of the letter from Messrs. Simpkins and Tayler and of the prescription on the marble bench top, as well as of Mr. Hetchings.

"Bound to hit you small men," Mr. Hetchings offered the opinion.

Mr. Moffatt humourlessly chuckled.

"Oh, that's true enough," he acknowledged.

"Ah, it's very hard lines," sympathised Mr. Hetchings, making a lifting movement of his big body that resulted in one leg being crossed over the other. The chair creaked as he did so. "Just at this time of all times. Must be very trying for you. I'm sure of that. Just when you're feeling your loss."

Mr. Moffatt, his eyes to the floor, noticed a dark, oval stain on the green linoleum near his feet. He had not noticed it before. He also became aware of a small ball of crumpled paper that should have been in the waste box but when thrown to it had evidently missed its mark.

"I'm having a lot of trouble just at present," said Mr. Hetchings.

Mr. Moffatt looked up at him inquiringly. He felt he must be interested in Mr. Hetchings' troubles.

"Up at the rectory, I mean," pursued Mr. Hetchings. "We're having a great deal of trouble with that wall-paper of ours. The house is so frightfully damp, you know, during the winter. It's not a well-built residence at all. The paper simply won't stay on the walls. And I paid a lot of money to have those rooms papered. There's really new flooring needed in many of the rooms, too. Well, some of the boards are positively rotten. One of us is going to break an ankle going through them some day. Dangerous, you know. Then I've had to have new gas pipes laid quite recently. Old ones were leaking frightfully. The man I got to inspect them said there was nothing else to be done but have new pipes. Nothing else to be *done*, mind you. Expense! It's just terrible."

"Oh, I'm sure," agreed Mr. Moffatt, and was keenly aware that he ought to be getting on with that prescription.

“There's a lot of painting I'll have to have done, too,” Mr. Hetchings went on, gesticulating. “But —well, for the present it just doesn't *get* done. You see, I haven't the time; and I can't afford a painter just now. If I had the leisure I'd do lots of things. You know, some people think a clergy-man has a very easy time of it. But don't you believe that. On Sunday there's a service at eight, Sunday School at ten, another service at eleven, a children's service in the afternoon, and another service in the evening. Then there's evensong every day. And through the week I have young people's classes, and a marriage or so; and usually an average of three or four burials. I've had as many as three burials in one afternoon. And all that's quite apart from visiting. What?”

“Oh, yes, you've got your hands full,” agreed Mr. Moffatt, slightly smiling and nodding his head. The words repeated themselves in his mind:

. . . Three or four burials. Three or four . . .

“How did you enjoy your trip home to England?” asked Mr. Hetchings.

“Oh, very much indeed. I had a splendid trip.”

“Successful? Was it successful?”

“Well, hardly. I'm afraid anything but successful.”

“I'm sorry to hear that. Did it involve you in actual loss, might I ask?”

“Well—h'm—of course. But it's not so bad as all that. Oh, I could stand the loss of the money. The worst feature of the trip was to come home and——”

“Yes, I know. I know. I know what it means. I *wanted* to speak to you after the service on Sunday. Just to say a few words to you. I saw you in your pew. I thought I'd be sure to catch you before you went out. I thought you'd be bound to wait until the rain stopped a little. But someone told me you went off straight away—went marching up the street, they said. You seemed in a great hurry. Had you to get back quickly?”

Mr. Moffatt smiled at the report of his “marching off.”

“Well——” he hesitated. “I—er—I—just—er—I just felt I must get out into the open air. I had a lot of energy to work off.”

“Energy, eh? I wish I had it.” Mr. Hetchings paused, then went on: “Nothing in the service that upset you, I suppose, was there?”

“Oh no. No particular thing.” Mr. Moffatt scratched his head and smoothed his moustache. “Ah dear,” he said, as Mr. Hetchings appeared to be waiting. “I don't know what I can tell you. I don't know what it was. Everything about the service seemed to upset me. That's all I know.”

“Oh?” Mr. Hetchings formed his lips as if to whistle. “I'm awfully sorry to hear that.”

Mr. Moffatt reddened in his cheeks. He felt he was being unpleasant to Mr. Hetchings; and he did not enjoy being unpleasant.

"It was just—well, you know," he went on to say, "I've been terribly upset about Florence——."

"Naturally."

"I was feeling awful on Sunday, I can tell you. And I just felt I must find some rest and peace somehow. That's just how I felt. I thought that in church I'd find some kind of comfort—some sort of explanation or satisfaction, as it were."

"Didn't you?"

"H'm—h'm. Well, really, I didn't find that satisfaction in the church service. It left me where I was. The whole thing seemed to rub me up the wrong way."

"Oh?" Mr. Hetchings expressed his concern. "I *am* sorry to hear you say that."

Mr. Moffatt inhaled a deep breath. He did not like to go on like this. He would far rather have been saying something that would give Mr. Hetchings pleasure. As it was he was casting reflections on Mr. Hetchings and his work.

"I was too upset, I suppose," he added, his lips forming a smile.

"Yes," agreed Mr. Hetchings, with a lift of his body that brought his leg farther over the other one and made the chair creak again. "I should think that is what it was."

. . . I hope those people don't come in for a little while yet for that prescription, reflected Mr. Moffatt, as he glanced at the small, scribbled paper lying on the marble, the fold in the middle of it making it have half its surface flat on the marble and the other half striking an angle into the air.

"Well," said Mr. Hetchings, as Mr. Moffatt said nothing, "the church, you know, has been a great comfort, a great solace, to many in a position like you."

"Oh, I don't doubt that. Indeed I'm sure of it."

" 'O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God,' says the great St. Paul, you remember," said Mr. Hetchings, and added, pointing a forefinger: " 'How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out! For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things.' says the great St. Paul, you remember," said Mr. Hetchings, and added, pointing a forefinger: " 'How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out! For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things.' "

Mr. Moffatt nodded.

" 'Rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation,' you'll remember St. Paul enjoins us to be," Mr. Hetchings added. "And you remember what St. John

says, 'So God loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son to the end that all that believe in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.'

"Yes, yes, quite true," Mr. Moffatt nodded his understanding.

"Everlasting life," repeated Mr. Hetchings. "That great teaching has given inestimable comfort to many. Christ the hope of glory!"

"You do believe that we are sinners and that God's anger with us could only be appeased by His Son dying on the cross?"

Mr. Hetchings uncrossed his legs, then crossed them again the other way round, while the chair creaked once more.

"Ah now," he said, frowning and looking at one of his black, shiny shoes, "that idea is very crude, I know—and very old-fashioned." He sat silent for a few moments, while Mr. Moffatt felt as though he had been most unfair. "No," Mr. Hetchings continued at length. "No; I don't believe in that."

There was another silence, while Mr. Hetchings still looked at his shoe, and Mr. Moffatt's gaze was fixed on the dark stain in the linoleum.

In his mind there were the words:

. . . What does he believe? . . .

And at length he overcame his diffidence in asking what might be considered a strictly personal question and inquired:

"What *do* you believe, Mr. Hetchings?"

"What do I believe?" repeated Mr. Hetchings, and made the chair creak again. "H'm! Well, that's a big question."

"I mean just what do you *think* about it all?"

"Yes, that's all very well. But it isn't so easy as that. I don't know that I can answer you. You'd have to give me time to think about that. What do I believe? What do I believe?"

There was a long pause once more. At length Mr. Hetchings ended it by saying:

"I—I'm afraid—really—I can't tell you what I believe about these things. It's such a complicated matter. It's too difficult to answer off-hand. Perhaps I can say just this: I believe in Christ. That is what the church teaches us all to do—to believe in Christ, the resurrected Christ. Christ the hope of glory!"

"You do believe that Christ rose from the dead?"

"Why, of course. Don't you, Mr. Moffatt?"

"Well—I—yes, I suppose I do. But I'm a layman, and I don't know."

"Ah, neither do I *know*," said Mr. Hetchings, looking up from his shoe. "But it's what the church has always taught. We've always been taught that by the church."

“What do you mean by ‘the church’? You mean somebody who is an authority in the church?”

“No. I mean—well, the church: that's all I can say. It's what has always been believed in the church.”

“But there'd always be a body in the church of those who could be referred to—I mean, of those who do know?”

“Oh no. Not at all. The doctrines of the church have been handed down to us—handed down from generation to generation right from the days of the apostles. We believe. We *must* believe. What is it St. Mark says? ‘He that believeth shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned.’ That's clear enough, isn't it? Why not believe?”

“But what doctrine is it we are to believe? Isn't it that we are wicked and sinful in the eyes of God, and that only by believing that Christ's death on the cross appeased God could we escape His wrath? Isn't that it? It's what I've always been taught. I don't know any other doctrine. Isn't that what has been handed down?”

“Yes, but I know it's very childish—it's barbaric, indeed.”

“But what else is there in the church that has been handed down?”

Mr. Hetchings sighed, and Mr. Moffatt felt sorry for him.

“Well, really, Mr. Moffatt,” he said at length, “you're touching on a deep subject. I don't like to talk about this sort of thing to everybody. But you're different. I know that doctrine of the appeasement of God has been the teaching of the church for generations. And frankly I don't believe in it. I can't be more candid than that, can I? Yes, I preach it in my own pulpit, I know. But what else can I do? It's what I'm paid to preach. I can't be expected to get up and confess that I don't believe in what is the central doctrine of Christianity, can I? What else is left? There's nothing—nothing that you can talk about. Am I to give up my living, and take up some other profession? At my time of life? With a wife and four children to look after?”

Mr. Moffatt remained standing, still with his eyes on the dark stain in the linoleum. He was thinking:

. . . I don't know. I'm sure I don't. Poor Hetchings. . . .

“And it's not altogether that, either,” Mr. Hetchings went on. “That's the mean and sordid side of it, I know; though it's a very real side, I can assure you; and I'm only human. But there's another side. There *is* something in Christianity, Mr. Moffatt. *There's something in it!*” he added, looking very earnest and striking a forefinger in the air. “When I say that I believe in Christ, that's all I can tell you. There's more in Christ than a mere word or a mere figure in history. I feel that strongly. *More* than that I don't know. Nor does anybody in the church know. We're just hanging on to that. There's

something in it—*some* truth in it somehow. That's where we stand today. We're groping. The true teaching has been lost: in the dark ages, the ages of the martyrs, it's my belief. There was nobody fit to carry it on. And we've never recovered it. What we've got is a crude idea that nobody can really believe in. Beyond that—nothing. But it remains with every individual one of us—with you just as much as with me, Mr. Moffatt, and with all earnest, thinking people—to live such pure lives that God in His own time will inspire us with those mysteries that have been lost—the real message of Christ. Let us live worthily, and maybe the true teaching will be revealed to us again.”

Mr. Moffatt looked up from gazing at the stain on the linoleum and nodded his head.

“Now I must be going,” said Mr. Hetchings, and there were more creaks from the chair as he uncrossed his legs, put his hands on his knees and rose to his feet. “I have a number of other places to visit before I'm finished for the day. It's going to take me all my time to get round. You know, a parson nowadays really needs a motorcar. I know I could do a lot better with one. But”—he shrugged his shoulders—“can't afford it. Oh, I might be able to some day. Ah well!”

He held out his hand to Mr. Moffatt. Mr. Moffatt took and shook it.

“Thank you for coming,” he said. “It's very good of you.”

Mr. Hetchings smiled and shook his head.

“No, no. It's my work. Now look here, don't you worry. And don't you be upset. Hold on. You'll be all right. Good-bye!”

He relinquished his hand from Mr. Moffatt's, and with a smile squeezed through the door into the shop and was gone.

“Good-bye!” returned Mr. Moffatt.

. . . That prescription, were the words in his mind. . . .

IV. The Mixture

He took up the prescription and read the names of the ingredients mentioned.

. . . What is it? his thoughts ran on. Spirit ammon. aromat., tincture card. co., infusion gent. co. Eight ounce. Mrs. Johnston. Something to tone up the stomach, that's all. Ah, my God, my God. Hetchings. . . .

He put the prescription on the desk beside the letter from Messrs. Simpkins and Tayler, then crossed the dispensary floor, bent down, and took an eight-ounce bottle from a shelf.

. . . The only thing I can see to do, he thought, is to write to those people and tell them to put the picture up again with a lower reserve. Must have a

reserve of some figure. Can't just let the thing go. Too damned absurd. O-o-o-oh—say thirty-five pounds. Thirty pounds. There. I can't say anything lower than that, or I might as well not sell at all. If they can't get thirty pounds they can send the picture back to me. Might as well have it here. Hetchings. Ah dear, dear. Have to hurry now with this mixture. . . .

He sighed as he walked to the desk again and took up a graduated measuring glass.

. . . What is it? Spirit aetheris nitrosi. Very bad writing, this. Minims fifteen. Sixteen times fifteen—that's—er—that's—let me see—four—drams. There's nothing *in* the church. No mysterious source of knowledge. Nothing. Oh, I've never thought there was anything more than what appeared to be. Oh, no, no. It doesn't surprise me to hear what Hetchings has admitted. Go on: I've always known it. Always, always. What is it again? Four drams. Spirit aetheris nitrosi. Let me see now. Four drams. . . .

He took down the bottle of spirit, poured four drams of it into the measuring glass and ran the liquid into the empty eight-ounce bottle.

. . . It's what you come to, he went on to reflect as he did this. It's no good. There's nothing to lean on, nothing you can rely on. The church—yes, I suppose you do get the idea into your head that it's the background to life. You're a damned fool, of course. Church knows no more than you do yourself. “We're groping.” “There's nothing.” It's like a statue that you might have by some chance thought to be alive, and then you happen to go up to it one day and touch it; and you find that it's only a piece of dead, cold marble. Oh, it's funny, if you've got a laugh inside you. Nothing in the church. There isn't any life in it. And where is there any life, any wisdom, any knowledge, if it isn't in the church? . . .

He frowned as he looked again at the prescription. He felt very tired.

. . . What's this? Tincture card. co., minims ten. That's—let me see—two drams, forty minims. Ah dear. Two drams, forty. There's no rest in this life. Nowhere that you can be refreshed and be at peace. Like having to keep on walking and walking for an eternity. Nowhere to sit down. And you have to keep on walking, no matter how tired you are. It's the only thing to do: to keep on going. Just to keep on and on. For no purpose. But just to keep on. . . .

He sighed again as he measured the tincture in the graduated glass and poured it slowly into the prescription bottle.

. . . Of course, he was thinking, you can say things to yourself: say you never did think that clergymen somehow had access to knowledge denied to ordinary members of the church. But to be told so straight out by your own rector, is—well, it takes something to swallow that. Hetchings. Reverend Mr. Hetchings. Oh, reverend, be bothered. Well, he can call

himself that if he wants to. I suppose he's more honest than a lot more of them. It's no use. This has made me feel like throwing up everything. What's the good of anything? "Don't you worry," he says. "Hold on." Hold on to what? On to nothing. The worst of it is that you do get these ideas into you about the church being infallible and wise and knowing a lot. It's worked into your head when you're a child and it doesn't work out again easily. And now when you're brought face to face with the facts about the church, it's like something inside you rocking and swaying and tumbling in ruins. . . . Well, I'm not sentimental: but there it is. Ruins. The whole thing smashed. . . . There's the church; it's there; it's always there, you feel, whenever you're up against things and you want to come to be appeased; and when you go to it and put it to the test, it breaks to pieces. Yes, I probed too far. I asked too many questions. Dear, dear, dear. . . . Infusion gent. co. . . .

He filled up the bottle with infusion, then sought a cork from the drawer beneath the cash register.

. . . Hetchings, continued his thoughts. "Am I to give up my living and take to some other profession?" Yes, man, for God's sake do that. Anything rather than go on with what you don't believe. "At my time of life? With a wife and four children?" Yes, get out of it, by all means. It's too serious a matter for you to stay where you are. For the sake of your own soul, if for nothing else. "It's what I'm paid to preach." What kind of a man can you call him? Hetchings. "Yes, I preach it in my own pulpit, I know." Oh, you devil of a hypocrite, Hetchings. With your service at eight, Sunday school at ten, another service at eleven, and there's almost no end to it. "And frankly I don't believe it," he says. "Rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation." Oh, it's all very well. You can tell that to somebody else. Bother patience. "Everlasting life," and "the hope of glory," and—oh—oh—well, all the rest of it. Yes, we just believe. If we don't believe, we're damned. Ah, my God. . . .

He felt utterly depressed as he screwed a cork into the bottle, slammed shut the corks drawer, and went to the desk to write a label.

. . . Oh, I don't want to say anything against Hetchings, he went on thinking. I don't want to be up against anyone. Poor devil of a man. He's got a hard battle to fight in his mind. Hard to say what you'd do in another man's circumstances. "Service at eight, another at eleven, another at ——." To be taken—three times—a day. Mrs. Johnston. . . .

He put the finished medicine on a shelf above the square drawers with the green cut-glass handle knobs. He felt shut in by a black wall of melancholy that was pressing him down. He walked to the dispensary window and looked up through the upper pane at the clear blue sky above

the opposite grocer's shop.

. . . The one I love—to be gone, his reflections continued. There's a great hole in my life: a vast, blank hole. How can I go on? Where's the incentive? Darling Florence—just want you. That's what's wrong with me. Miserable without you. Loved one. Are you *all right*? Just to know that you were happy. All that matters. Nothing else worries me. . . . Yet I suppose something else does. I'm selfish. But I can't help myself. I want *you*. And you seem gone for ever. Darling Florence—beautiful life. *You*. I want you. You are what I want. . . . Far away. Gone. No use. Never—never—see her again. Never. My God! Never. Never. . . .

V. Ernest

A few mornings later he was walking from the Royal Hotel, where he had just finished his breakfast, back over the road to the shop. Across the tram-lines, over the gutter, on to the kerbstone, across the asphalt pavement.

. . . Hallo! he thought, as he mounted the stone step into the shop. Customer. Why didn't Ernest tell me? He knows he's to keep an eye on the shop while I'm away and run across and tell me if anybody comes in. Very dull, that boy. Never has his wits about him. . . .

“Hope you haven't been waiting long,” he said to the elderly man standing before the glass counter, as he himself walked round to the back of it.

“I was almost going out again,” declared the customer. “I've waited five minutes, and nobody has appeared.”

“I'm very sorry. I left a boy in charge. He couldn't have heard you,” Mr. Moffatt offered the explanation, and reflected:

. . . Where has the lad gone? . . .

The customer desired liver pills.

When he had been satisfied, Mr. Moffatt entered the dispensary, but Ernest was not there. He opened the door to the residence, walked across the passage, through the back entrance and called across the neglected garden for the boy.

“Ernest! Ernest! Are you there, Ernest?”

But there was no answer.

. . . H'm, he thought. Must have gone out. Extraordinary boy he is. No brains at all. That garden's an eyesore. Nobody to care for it now. I'm no gardener. Neither is Naomi, and she seems to have no time, either. Can't afford to have a man here. Tch, tch. . . .

He re-entered the dispensary, shut the door, and walked to the bench. He

stood before it a moment, thinking.

. . . Didn't I leave the cash-box here? I know I intended to fasten it in the locker; but I was sure I went off to breakfast and forgot it. Funny. Perhaps I put it in after all. . . .

He produced his bunch of keys from a trouser pocket, opened the locker under the desk and looked inside.

. . . No, not there. Very funny. Where can I have put it? I must have brought it downstairs. Sure I did. H'm. Well, it's not in there, anyhow. No doubt about that. H'm. That's very very funny. It must be somewhere. Can't have walked off. Wonder did Ernest see it? Where *is* the lad? . . .

He swallowed a lump in his throat as he looked around the dispensary again, but could still not see the cash-box.

. . . Couldn't have brought it down, he concluded. Go upstairs and look. . . .

He left the dispensary, and returned again a few minutes later, still without the cash-box.

. . . Well, that's the strangest thing, he reflected, as he leaned his back against the edge of the desk and frowned while he surveyed the floor and the ledges of the dispensary afresh. It seems simply to have gone. I wish that *boy* were here. What am I going to do for change? Nothing in the till but that shilling I've just taken. Where the devil can he have got to? If he doesn't turn up very soon, I'll be worried. Ernest. Yes. Let me see now. There's something like sixteen or seventeen pounds in that cash-box. Tch, tch! Lot of money. Two five-pound notes, I remember. Two or three pound notes, that'd be twelve or thirteen pounds. Three or four ten-shilling notes: say fourteen ten. And then quite four pounds in silver—over eighteen pounds! Whew! Eighteen! Can't think that—no, no, I won't say that. But where has he got to? I could have sworn I brought the box down here. That's what I remember. I don't remember locking it away. Don't know what's best to do. Police. Detectives. Arrest. I'm sure I brought it down. Robbery. Where *is* he? . . .

By ten o'clock Ernest still not having appeared, Mr. Moffatt had telephoned the police. By half-past ten he had been interviewed by a plain-clothes policeman. By half-past five he had been informed by the policeman that the cash-box had been found in Ernest's home with thirteen pounds in it, and that Ernest himself had been arrested in Serenial Park with five pounds in his pockets. Mr. Moffatt had said he would not prosecute: he would be satisfied if the money were returned to him.

At a quarter to six he was answering a call on the telephone.

"This is Dr. Eberley speaking, Mr. Moffatt," said the voice at the other end of the wire.

"Yes, yes, doctor," Mr. Moffatt responded.

"You remember dispensing a prescription of mine a few days ago for a Mrs. Johnston."

"Mrs. Johnston? Ye-e-s."

"I suppose you haven't still got the prescription, have you?"

"Yes, I think I have. I hadn't copied it when they called for the medicine. They were going to come back for it."

"Could you bring it to the telephone for a moment?"

"Yes, yes."

Mr. Moffatt found the little slip of paper and brought it to the telephone.

"Now did I order spirit aetheris nitrosi?" asked the voice in the receiver.

"Well—if you weren't careful you might mistake it for that; but it's spirit ammon. aromat."

"Yes, I thought I ordered spirit ammon. aromat. But I happened to smell the bottle at Mrs. Johnston's to-day, and I smelt spirit aetheris nitrosi."

"Do you—are you—are you sure of that—doctor?"

"Oh, there's spirit aetheris nitrosi in it right enough. The bottle smells strongly of that. Oh, there's no great harm done. Nothing to get alarmed at."

"Well—I—I—can't think——"

"I thought it just as well to 'phone you and make sure. I didn't think I ordered that stuff."

"I can't think how I could have——"

"I've given them a fresh prescription, anyhow. I expect they'll be along with it soon."

"I'm always so careful to——"

"All right, Mr. Moffatt. No harm done. Fortunately. Good-bye."

"Yes—good-bye."

. . . Goodness gracious! he reflected as he stood beside the telephone after he had replaced the receiver on its hook. What can be the matter with me? Spirit ammon. aromat.—spirit aetheris nitrosi; I've *never* made a mistake like that before. . . .

He studied the writing on the prescription minutely as he moved away from the telephone.

. . . Spirit ammon. aromat. And I put in spirit aetheris nitrosi. Dear, dear, dear. Can't imagine what the doctor will think of me. Very decent about it, of course. But for me to make a mistake like that! Can't think how——. What could I have been——? Tch, tch, tch. When was it? Must have been the afternoon when Hetchings was here. It was after Hetchings went. I was thinking about what he'd said, I suppose. Well, if I'm going to make mistakes like this, I can't trust myself. Don't know what I might do. Not fit

to touch a bottle for fear I'm putting in the wrong thing, or the wrong quantity. Awful state to get into. Never in all my life made a mistake like that before. If it gets known that I've made this blunder, it's going to cause no end of harm to me. People will be afraid to trust me with prescriptions. And the amount of other business I do wouldn't justify my being open more than two hours a day. Spirit ammon. aromat. And I put in spirit aetheris nitrosi. . . .

He sighed as he folded the prescription across and slipped it into the envelope marked "Mrs. Johnston" from which he had taken it.

. . . And the idea of that boy, he went on to think as he left the envelope to project from the leaves of the prescription book. Of all people, Ernest a thief. Dear, oh dear, oh dear. Makes me feel almost sick to think of it: to think that he'd rob me. While I was away at breakfast at the hotel, to think that he'd take the cash-box from where I must have left it here on the bench—and go off with it. Some boys I *know*—I know you've got to be careful with them. But Ernest——! I would never have thought that of him: think he'd actually steal from me. Never looked upon him as that kind of boy. That's why I can't imagine how he could have done it. He was so stupid, such a dull-witted lad. At least I thought he was honest. Always felt I could *trust* Ernest. . . .

He was very heavy in his heart as he lifted a big jar of Epsom salts on to the bench and put next to it a pile of small squares of blue paper, preparatory to wrapping up packets of Epsom salts.

. . . Oh, you don't know where you are, he concluded, as he began to spread out the small blue papers over the bench and to measure a quantity of salts on to each one. What with one thing and another: what with making that mistake with the prescription, and now Ernest stealing that money. Every damned thing seems topsy-turvey. Don't know what on earth's going to happen next. Can't be sure what next I'll do or what anybody else is going to do. If I can't be certain that I'd never make such a silly mistake in dispensing as that, and I can't be sure that a boy like Ernest wouldn't ever steal—well, what—what the—what *can* you be sure of? You lose all confidence in yourself. There's nothing you can refer to, nothing you can rely on. It's a shocking way to feel. Enough to make some people go crazy. You don't know where you're getting to. It puts you into a whirl. You lose your grip on things. Got no foothold. Did I put a full measure on that paper? Now I can't remember. It looks equal to the others. I'm not sure. Better measure it again. No, there you are, it's not a full measure. Wonder now if I've got all the others right. Well, am I going to measure them all again? Tch, tch, tch. . . .

He paused with the little measure in his hand, and looked at the rows of

blue papers and the large jar beside them.

. . . In they all go, he decided with a sigh. Back into the jar. I'll measure them out afresh. Have to keep my mind on my work now or I'll be making more trouble for myself. . . .

He was particularly careful for a while as he measured out a fresh series of heaps on the little blue papers. At length he burst out in thought:

. . . For heaven's sake don't let me get into a bad nervous state. I can't go on with the business if I get like that. Why *are* these troubles sent to me? Is it to make it impossible for me to carry on? Ah, it seems you must just trust in God. The only thing to do. You must believe that He knows best. You get back to that: it's all that's left to you when you lose your confidence in the church: that you must put your trust in Him. . . .

VI. Naomi

It was on an evening several weeks afterwards when he had closed the shop and was lying back in his armchair in the sitting-room reading a book, that Naomi let herself in by the front door, entered the sitting-room, and sat for a while in the armchair opposite him.

She seemed to wish to be less strange towards him.

"I'm quite tired out," she admitted, leaning back.

"Yes, you look tired, Naomi," agreed Mr. Moffatt. "Been doing a lot to-day, eh?"

"A lot? I should think I have been!" exclaimed Naomi. "And I've had no tea. No time for it."

"Dear, dear! Haven't you really? You poor child! Won't you get yourself something now?"

"Later on. I'll sit here for a few minutes, though."

. . . Wouldn't let me get her anything, I suppose, he reflected. I'm not sure I could get what she wants, anyhow. What has she been doing? Perhaps she's too tired to talk about it. I won't ask her. . . .

He held his book with its edge against his knee as he looked into the empty fireplace. Naomi and he were silent for a while, until the girl asked:

"Father, if I were to leave here altogether—you wouldn't mind, would you?"

. . . Leave—*altogether!* . . .

"Why—I—I——"

"I've had the offer to-day," she explained, "of a very good position as teacher in a school in a girls' college at Adelaide. It's not only that this is a good position from my point of view—money and responsibility, I mean—but in Adelaide the Service Society isn't so strong, and they need young

speakers there for it.”

“Yes—yes—I see.”

But his heart was thumping as the result of what she had said.

“It won't really make any difference to you, father,” Naomi was continuing. “We see so little of each other as it is. I'm so seldom at home. And in any case you're so much of your time in the shop.”

“Oh, that's quite true. All the same I think I'll miss”——

“You *will* be all right, won't you? I thought I must ask you, father. You don't mind if I accept the position, do you?”

“No, dear, of course I don't. If you want to take it. If you think it will be best for you. Yes, yes, leave me, of course. I'll be all right. Don't let me keep you back. You were thinking I might not like you to go away, were you? You haven't made up your mind yet?”

“Oh yes, I accepted the position this afternoon.”

“Oh?”

“I thought I must tell you, father, that's all. But I was so sure that it couldn't make any difference to you.”

“No, no, dear. No, no, of course not. You go. Of course. Good luck to you. I hope you get on well in Adelaide.”

“Oh, I think I will. But it's the Service Society I'm thinking of mostly. I want to serve, father. I want to serve people—to serve this great orphan humanity. And I want to help other people to see what a great thing is service. The joy of it. The joy of going out and helping. I love that, father. It's life to me. And here in Sydney there isn't the same scope as there will be for me in Adelaide. They have plenty of speakers here in Sydney. But in Adelaide there is a great need of them. I feel that people want me, there.”

“Then naturally you must go.”

She had spoken more freely to him than he could remember her doing at any other time. He felt happy about that. And in his mind were the words:

. . . High ideals. Oh, she can't do anything else but go, when she feels as she does. Service. Humanity. Joy of serving. Oh, splendid. Making other people happy. Lectures. I don't want to say a word to discourage her from going. . . .

But when she had gone upstairs to bed and he was trying to interest himself in his book again, he could not help reflecting:

. . . Twelve hundred miles away. *Adelaide*. All that far. Never see her for months. Oh, yes *she*'ll come back often to see me. No, not for *at least a year*. Of course, I know I don't see much of her now. It can't make so much difference. Practically no difference at all. Just that I won't hear her say so brightly, “Good morning!” Won't hear her coming in at night. Won't hear her footsteps across the hall and up the stairs. That's all. Can't make any

difference to me. No, no, no. But—well, I do love her. She's so pretty. I see Florence in her. Naomi! To *Adelaide*. Not even another voice in the house, then. Not anybody else's footprint. I've watched her grow up from a little tot. Such a bright little child she always was. In Adelaide there is a great need of her. Humanity. Oh, I mustn't be the one to hold her back. . . .

He felt very weary as he trudged up the stairs to his bedroom.

When his head was laid on the pillow, his mind wanted to run on:

. . . I can't bear this. You mustn't go away, Naomi. You're all I have. I can't stand anything else being taken from my life. . . .

But he checked his mind's careering and thought:

. . . No, I don't want her to stay here just for my sake. I'm not such a selfish devil as that. It's just that I don't understand things at all. All a puzzle to me. I must just trust God to guide me safely. God. God. Put my trust in Him. . . .

And in that mood he fell asleep.

He woke up later, however, with the words in his mind:

. . . Cyril. He's taken. Killed. Gallipoli. Then Florence. And the picture won't sell. And to think of that boy Ernest. And I make a mistake in dispensing. And now Naomi's going to Adelaide. Not that I want Naomi to stay if she wants to go. But—it's all these things together. I can't stand it. I tell you, it's too much. Everything taken from me. My loved ones gone, the business dwindling every day. Nothing will go right. I'm hemmed in. I'm crushed down. And there's no peace, no comfort. Oh, I must trust in God. . . .

He turned over and tried to sleep again. In his mind there recurred the word:

. . . God. God. God. . . .

And there was a suggestion in his mind of an old bearded face in the sky, an enormous face, wreathed in clouds.

. . . Ah, he reflected, it's not that idea of God that I believe in. That's childish. Gives no satisfaction. Belongs to puerile minds. . . .

He wanted to go to sleep, but soon there were the thoughts in his mind:

. . . The Creator. Creator of heaven and earth. Well, of course, that's from the church. And Hetchings said they were groping. God the Father. Well, that's from the church too. Oh, there must be some life that is greater than human life—doesn't matter what name you give to it—some life that made the world—and everything: some life that is the power behind all things. I suppose I don't really know. Nobody knows. But just some great and beautiful life that has power over everything. Some loving power. Loving. . . . Loving? . . .

He writhed between the bed-clothes, and turned over again.

. . . Loving? . . .

He rubbed his hand over his forehead, sighed, and flung his hand out over the pillow.

. . . *Loving* power? . . .

His heart thumped against his breast. He felt uncomfortably hot, and moved his feet restlessly to find a cool place between the sheets. He moved his head to a fresh place on the pillow. At length he turned again and lay on his back.

. . . Ah, how can a loving power allow misery to be in the world? he demanded in his mind. Mine is not the only trouble. The world is full of trouble. Why does not God take away that trouble and misery?—if He is a loving God?—a beneficent God? Oh, *can* He be loving and kindly? Who knows what He is like? The church doesn't know. Nobody knows. We're in the grip of some great power, some great life, which brings things to pass. And what kind of things? Troubles, miseries, partings between loved ones, cares, worries, anxieties, difficulties, pains and sorrows. What is the amount of joy in the world compared with the amount of sadness? How many people are happy? And how many people are unhappy? . . .

He groaned and beat with his fist on the bed.

. . . How can this great power be full of love towards us? What reason *is* there to think that God is loving and kindly? We don't know that He is. Why do we think so? All the evidence should make us think He is evilly disposed towards us. Ah—ah—ah, how can we know? We don't know. We're in a dark forest. We're tiny children, and we do not know the way. . .

He turned on to his side again and breathed heavily.

. . . Oh, the intolerable mystery of it all! What has happened to my darling Florence? Oh, Florence, my dear one, are you still alive and here, and is it just that I can't see you, or are you that body and rotting in the earth? Oh, this is maddening! I can't bear this perplexity. I can't live unless I know something. It is bewildering. Is there not in this great universe some life that can hear the cries of human hearts? Is there no glimmer of light?—nothing but the pitch darkness and the nightmare of uncertainty? We do not know. We do not know! . . .

He was panting with the strength of his emotions, and in his temples there was an increasing pain.

. . . It is a mighty world—a mighty universe, his thoughts ran on. A universe of frightening spaces. We are less than little specks of dust in it all. It is so vast that the creator of it must have vast plans for it. Vast to us. So vast that those plans would shatter our brains if we tried to comprehend them. We can think only little bits of things. And in the vast intentions of

this great power how do we know that our part is one that would please our individual wills? How do we know that we are of any account in the mighty scheme? How do we know that we merit any more attention than we bestow upon the minute creatures that reveal themselves under the microscope? How do we know that we are not the playthings of this great power? How do we *know*? Does anybody know? *Who* can say he *knows*? Who can say that we are not moved this way and that for the sake of experiment?—that what are to us great trials and misfortunes are not brought about to judge the effect on us?—as we would experiment with chemicals and elements? Why *should* we think that what we call “God” wishes to advance our happiness as individuals? Why should we think anything at all in any way about that great life? We do not know. There is none of our knowledge that does not stop sooner or later before wreaths of blackest ignorance. None of our knowledge gets back to causes, to things that we most need to know. . . .

He shook his head from side to side as if to free himself from something that bound him down.

. . . Ah, these ideas we get about things, he went on to think. Of God and the Devil, of the day of judgment, of heaven and hell—vain speculations. But speculations don't bear you up when you're in trouble. I want some footing, some real knowledge, something I can say that is so. But of the things that touch our hearts we know nothing. Human nature baffles us even—what people will do. Everybody is a mystery. We are mysteries to ourselves. We have no foundation to work on—*no real knowledge*. Born in sin?—Christ came to save us? Ah, just words. No knowledge there. Who can say he *knows*? And what else but knowledge can comfort you? . . .

From sheer exhaustion at last he fell asleep, and when he awoke next morning he felt tired and depressed. His head ached. He felt worn out.

. . . I'm just an empty vessel, he began to think. I know nothing. I've lived all my life without realising that. But now I see. I've allowed vague beliefs and forms to stay in the back of my mind and lull me into a sense of security. But they've been only shells—no substance in them. When I put them to the test, they collapse, and I'm left with nothing. There's *nothing* worth while that I can say I know. . . .

VII. His Surrender

Naomi was unusually busy during the following weeks, and she was flushed with excitement when she walked into the dispensary late in the afternoon that she was going away.

Mr. Moffatt was whirling round powdery pills inside a wooden lid, with

the under edge of the lid against a board. Ernest's successor, a dark-haired youth, stood at the sink rinsing bottles.

"I'm going now, father!" Naomi announced.

"Oh?"

He turned quickly from his pills and went to her.

"All ready now, eh?" he asked, smiling.

"Quite," said Naomi.

"Packed all your things all right, eh? Don't want me to fasten any straps? Or press any of your luggage shut?"

"Oh goodness, no. I've packed everything, and my cases are all in the taxi waiting at the front door."

"You *have* been busy!"

"Yes, and I don't want to keep the man waiting."

"Of course not. So now you're off. I'll go with you to the front door."

They walked out of the dispensary side by side, into the passage and up the hall.

"I'm sorry I'm not able to go to the station with you to see you off," he said. "But I'm afraid I can't get away."

"Oh, I know that. But it doesn't matter. There wouldn't be much object in your being at the station."

"No, perhaps not. It's just that I might have been able to do a few little things for you. Are you sure you're all right?—that you've got everything? Ticket——?"

"Well, of course I have."

"Got a nice seat in the train?"

"Booked it ages ago."

"Got a sleeping berth, I suppose?"

"Why, you don't imagine I'd sit up all that way?"

"I just wanted to make sure, dear. And how are you fixed up in Adelaide? You've made some arrangements about a good hotel, have you?"

"Oh, don't worry about me, father. Why, friends of mine got rooms for me a fortnight ago. I'm all right. I can look after myself. But I really must go. I have to meet someone in town and have dinner there before I go for the train. I haven't a minute to spare."

"Then I won't keep you. But when am I to see you again?"

"Oh, I haven't the *faintest* idea. It might be ages and ages. I can't possibly tell you."

"Well, you'll write to me sometimes, won't you?"

They were at the door, and Naomi was opening it to reveal a taxi-cab waiting at the kerb and the driver of it looking towards the house as he heard the door being unfastened.

“Yes, I'll write as often as I can. But you mustn't expect a letter for a long time. I'm going to be frightfully busy for the next few weeks.”

“Well, just send me a post-card to say you arrived in Adelaide safely.”

“I'll try to remember. Now I mustn't stay a minute longer.”

“Good-bye, my darling!”

He took her in his arms and kissed her again and again on her warm, soft cheek. When he released her she took his hand and shook it.

“Good-bye!” she said.

“Good-bye!”

He opened the iron gate in the verandah railing, and she walked through, crossed the pavement, and stepped into the taxi. The driver leaned round and banged the door of it shut.

. . . Nice-looking car, Mr. Moffatt reflected. . . .

The engine was being accelerated, and with a subdued roar that mounted in pitch until the gear was changed, the vehicle moved quickly away. Naomi waved her hand. Mr. Moffatt waved back, and muttered, “Good-bye! Good-bye!”

And then she was gone.

He clacked shut the iron gate, walked across the black-leaded step into the hall, and quietly closed the front door. The house seemed very still as he stood for a moment beside the hall-stand. He felt as though huge weights were pressing down all over him. He felt utterly miserable. He did not wish to go back to the making of those pills in the dispensary. He did not want to stay standing where he was. He did not want to do anything.

He sat down on the chair beside the hall-stand, rested his elbows on his knees and covered his face with his hands.

. . . Eight hundred pounds they offered for it, he mused, after a while. Ah, I wonder should I? And they'll find me one of their places to manage. I can leave Six Ways Cross for ever. Eight hundred pounds. Cash. It will pay what I owe the bank. Wouldn't get a better price from anybody else—the way the takings have gone down. But me the manager of a Blue Band Pharmacy! And what about the furniture here? Auction sale. Let it go for what it brings. The picture's being sent back to-morrow. Just put it in with the rest of the things. Let it all go. Let it all go. . . .

He raised his head, and his eyes rested on the pattern on the wall-paper which he remembered choosing with Florence fifteen years before. He looked at the carpet, so familiar to him for such a long time; at the sitting-room door, and the white porcelain handle on it; at the dark brown, woolly curtains on either side of the hall archway; at the pine-apple-like top of the head of the stairs banister; at the stair carpet; at the stair rods. Then he shook his head.

. . . Won't be hard to leave here, he reflected. All means nothing to me now. . . .

Chapter Eight

ON the morning he was going away, he had breakfast at the hotel across the road, then came back to the house, where every piece of furniture had a ticket on it, let himself in by the front door, walked into the sitting-room, and sat in one of the armchairs by the fireplace.

. . . Nine o'clock, he reflected, as he looked up at the clock on the mantel-piece. Sale begins at ten. H'm. Just an hour. People will begin to come in to look round shortly. . . .

He sighed and closed his eyes as he lay back in the chair.

. . . Wonder what that picture's going to fetch to-day, his thoughts went on. Thirty—forty pounds. No reserve on it. I'm just letting it go. Must get rid of it now, whatever it brings. Ah, it's cost me a lot of money and bother, and been a lot of disappointment. I hope to-day will be the last I'll see of it.

. . .

He opened his eyes again and looked at the big picture where it stood, with a ticket pasted on its wide gilt frame, against the front of the sofa.

. . . It's a funny sort of painting—really, he continued thinking. The people with their elaborate clothes in the shade of the trees, the gate with an angel, I suppose it is, on each side holding a flaming sword; and the naked man walking through the gate into the lighted field. Funny subject to paint. Suppose the artist, whoever he was, had *some* design in his head. He's wanted to represent something. But was it something he knew, I wonder, or something he just believed? Bound to have been something he just had faith in and took for granted. Human beings don't know things about life. We realise that when our minds are stripped bare. Mine has been stripped. Stripped naked. And I know that I know nothing. Naked. Yes, I'm a naked man. As naked as this man in the picture —as naked in mind, at any rate. I've been stripped of all my elaborate beliefs. No doubt about that. Oh, yes, very gorgeous clothes they are. They keep your mind at rest. And so long as you don't realise that they *are* clothes and not part of yourself, merely things you've assumed, you're all right. As right as rain. Oh, you're perfectly content. But when you begin to cast off all the things you don't really know, you soon find you're a naked man. Then you feel the cold. And mighty cold it is. No bright sunshine to warm you. You see, no light ever *has* shone on your mind. You've lived in continual shadow. But with your clothes on you've never realised it. Without your clothes, without your beliefs, you feel the cold terribly. The naked man, eh! Naked, indeed. . . .

He turned from the picture and looked at the clock again.

. . . Ten past nine, People ought to begin to come almost any time now,

he reflected. If they want to have a good look round. . . .

He crossed his legs, sank deeper into the armchair, and closed his eyes. In his mind he could see himself sitting in that chair, as he had so often done, and Mrs. Moffatt in the armchair opposite: when he had closed the shop for the night, and was enjoying a preliminary rest before he unlaced his shoes and pulled on the slippers that Mrs. Moffatt had put ready for him. "Takings been good to-day?" he could hear her saying. And could hear himself conceding in reply, "Oh—well—fair. Nothing to grumble at." "That's good." And she was leaning later over his chair and he was putting down his book and turning up his face to kiss her good-night.

. . . Ah, we were very happy, the words came into his mind. I loved her. I love her now. Though she's only a memory to me. Love is a beautiful thing. What a desert the world would be without it. Love. Like a perfect tender flower. It fills you with gratitude to know that there is love, that at least you can say in all your troubles—*love is*. . . .

He mused for a while on this, and then his heart beat faster, and he opened his eyes, got up from his chair, and walked up and down the room.

. . . Do I know nothing worth while? his thoughts were flowing on eagerly. I know something. I know that there is love. Nothing can shake that in me. That is something I know. Oh, a little thing! A little scrap of knowledge in the great mystery of the universe. Oh, but a great thing! Great because I *know* it. It is something to hold on to. A solid foundation. A foothold. . . .

He was filled with joy as he continued to pace the room.

. . . And if I can say I know there is love, I can say I know also that there is beauty. *Beauty is*. I know that. And I know that there is truth. And truth is wonderful. *Truth is*. There is love, there is truth, and there is beauty. Oh, abstract, yes: but realities. As real as anything can be. So definite and real that you could almost hold them. I do hold them, indeed. I hold them in myself. That is how I know them. Why, these things are life! More than forms. Love is more than kissing and embracing; beauty is more than an attribute of an object that pleases you; truth is more than what we say when we are not telling lies. These things are great forces of life; and to hold them in yourself and to live in the breath of them is the deepest of joys. This is knowledge. And knowledge is like a great sun inside you. . . .

He was breathing deeply with the strength of his emotions, as he walked backwards and forwards. At length he stopped and looked again at the painting: at the clothed people in the shadows, at the gateway through which the naked man was passing, at the winged figures with their flaming swords, and at the bright field beyond the gate.

. . . A naked man? he reflected excitedly. But a man *needs* to be naked.

He must first be naked in his mind, must first shed the mass of his beliefs before he can pass into the light of knowledge. The flaming sword of experience can burn to ashes what he only supposes; but it can never burn up what he knows. . . .
