

Days of Disillusion

Cobb, Chester Francis (1899-1943)

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Days of Disillusion

by

Why callest thou me good? None is good save one. (St. Mark X, 18)

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Days of Disillusion

Chapter One: The Little Boy's Day

I. Trains A and B.

He is lying on his back in the warm bed, holding the story-book before him with its lower edge resting on the quilt.

. . . One minute to go (the words are running through his mind). Five runs needed by St. Christopher's to draw with the College eleven: six needed to win. And Smithkins Minor, "the failure of the Fourth," faced College's crack bowler. In the grandstand the St. Christopher boys were restless. The game was as good as over. Smithkins might manage to protect his wicket for what would probably be the last ball of the day, but the score could not be altered. Not with Smithkins Minor there! What bad luck that their best bats-man had been taken ill at the last moment, leaving this Smithkins as second emergency to fill his place! And you haven't done your home work. Forty-five seconds to go. Smithkins, pale and nervous, glanced at the clock in the grandstand tower. "What! No home work? Stand out in front of the class there!" The hands told him that the game was practically finished. If Train A is travelling at fifty miles an hour and Train B at seventy miles an hour——. He could do nothing to help. For quarter of an hour he had been at the wicket and had not made a score. "Stand out there!" And yet . . . if he could only pull himself together. . . . "Class, stand up! Sit down! Up! Down! Up! Down!" The memory of what the sports master had casually remarked to him, "If you'd only develop that stroke of yours, you'd be a wonder, Smithkins!" was vivid in his mind. "What? No home work?" Could he even in these remaining seconds summon confidence in himself and boldly use the smashing stroke that he had secretly practised? "No home work?" It was such a queer stroke. No home work. The spectators would shriek with laughter. Home work. Did he dare to try it? Mr. Lutch. "What! You haven't done your arithmetic home work? I'll deal with you!" . . .

Bobbie's heart is thumping hard as he is allowing the story book to fall forward on to his chest and he can smell the stiff cloth cover of it.

. . . If Train A is travelling at fifty miles an hour, his mind is going on; and Train B is travelling at *seventy* miles an hour; where in their respective hundred-mile journeys from X to Y and from Y to X will they pass one another, if Train A starts from X at the same time as Train B starts from Y? . . .

He is shifting his pyjama'd little body restlessly between the warm sheets.

. . . X to Y—Y to X, he is thinking. Hundred miles. Train A fifty—Train

B seventy. *Both* of them going the same speed, they'd pass in the middle! Train A goes at fifty—Train B at seventy. Fifty—seventy. Train A—Train B. Train A at fifty—*Train B at seventy*. Where in their respective hundred-mile journeys from X to Y and from Y to——? Train A—Train B. If Train A is travelling at *fifty* miles an hour and Train B at *seventy*—miles—an—hour. X to Y. And from Y to X. . . .

He is raising the story book from its position over his chest, and looking again at the large black print.

. . . The spectators would shriek with laughter, the words are flowing on through his mind. Did he dare to try it? “Play!” Smithkins heard the low tones as in a dream, and held himself ready. “Where's your home work, young Watson, eh?” “What! You haven't done it? Stand out there! Where's my cane?” As in a dream, and held himself ready. “Play!” Smithkins heard the low tones as in a dream and held—himself—“I didn't know how to do it, sir!” Mr. Lutch. Old cow. X to Y. Hundred miles. Smithkins heard the low tones as in a——. One hundred miles. “I tried to do it, sir, but I couldn't.” “I suppose you'll say next that I didn't show you how it was done.” “I didn't remember about it, sir.” “Oh, you didn't remember being shown—only a couple of days ago—on the black-board? No excuse. Hold out your hand. Hold it out farther than that. There! . . . Hold it out again. Hold it out again, I tell you. Don't stand blubbering. You're not a baby. You're eight years old, aren't you? There! Perhaps that will teach you to pay more attention to the black-board another time. Go back to your seat. Next time I'll give you three cuts instead of two.” Smithkins watched College's crack bowler as he rubbed the red leather-covered ball caressingly between his hands. “Now go back to your seat.” And as he suddenly ran forward towards the stumps, shuffled with his feet while he poised his body and whirled his arm over his head. Then the little red globe whizzed out of the bowler's hand. Old Lutch. All the boys are frightened of him. Not only me. “Class, stand up! Sit down! Don't go to sleep! Fifteen and thirty-seven—*you!* What *is* it? Next boy. You're dreaming. Next! Come on! You're all asleep this morning. Wake *up!* Fifteen and thirty-seven. Next lad! Next! Next! Fifty-two, yes. You go up. Class, stand up! Sit down! Smarter! *Up! Down! UP! DOWN!* Next boy: twelve and fifty-eight! What are twelve and fifty-eight? Hurry up! Don't go to sleep!” . . .

Bobbie is inhaling an extra long breath and exhaling it slowly as he is turning over a page of the up-raised story book and his mind is following the lines of print on the over-leaf. He is swallowing a lump in his throat.

. . . Smithkins became lost to all sense of being watched by a thousand eager eyes. And with that forgetfulness of the importance of the occasion he stepped forward, executed that queer, deft movement which he had

mastered, and with all his strength hit the whirling, twisting ball in the middle of his bat. You have to get up now, go into the bathroom, brush your teeth, wash yourself under the shower, dress, have your breakfast, and walk to school, so that you get there before the final bell stops ringing. And you haven't . . .

“Are you getting up, Bobbie?” a voice is calling from the other side of the white bedroom door.

“Yes, mum,” he is answering as he goes on reading.

“It's late, you know. You'd better hurry.”

“Yes, I'm getting up now.”

. . . In the middle of his bat. Hit the whirling, twisting ball in the middle of his bat. From the grandstand there came a laugh, then a gasp. The ball soared towards the sky, soared up and up, over hundreds of peering faces, over the grand stand roof, missing the tower by inches. It travelled across the street outside, over the roofs of the opposite cottages, across the lane behind their back gardens, over the glass roof of the green house opposite, above the . . . Mr. Lutch. “Well, you're five minutes late this morning. Any excuse? What's that? Don't mumble. I'm not going to eat you. Why are you late? Eh? *Eh?* Oh, you overslept, did you? Well, little boys must be taught not to oversleep. Hold out your hand. There! Perhaps that will help you to remember. If you'd been ten minutes late it would have been two cuts—quarter of an hour late, three cuts. And so on. Now run to your seat. You've wasted enough time already. Class, stand up! Down! Up! Down!” . . . Across the lane behind their back gardens, over the glass roof of the greenhouse opposite, above the network of clothes lines, and smash! clean through the window of Mrs. Blossom's parlour, plump into the lap of Mrs. Blossom's friend at tea, off on to the crimson carpet, until it came to rest out of sight beneath the filigreed what-not. “Oh! Five minutes late for school—and no home work. Just step out in the front there, young Watson.” The grandstand could not contain the hilarious feelings of the St. Christopher boys. They swarmed pell-mell over the enclosure fence into the oval, shouting and . . .

“Bobbie!”

And there is a second knock on the other side of the white bedroom door.

“Yes, I'm getting up, mum!” he is replying promptly, his cheeks reddening.

“You'll be late for school, you know.”

“All right, mum. I'm getting up.”

He is slowly closing the book, letting it fall flat on the quilt, then turning over on to his side and knitting his brows.

. . . An express train, A, leaves X to go to Y, at the same time as an

express train, B, leaves Y to go to X, the distance between X and Y being one hundred miles. If Train A travels at *fifty* miles an hour and Train B at *seventy*, at what point in the journey will the two . . . ? I don't *care* where they'll meet. What's it matter? "No home lessons? I'll *deal* with you!" . . .

For ten minutes longer he is just lying there on his side, conscious that it is getting later and later and that he ought to be getting up. In his imagination he can hear the school bell ringing and see the boys running along the footpath to be in time. His heart is beating hard as he is conscious of the possibility of being late. But he is not getting up. And a further ten minutes is passing.

Now he can hear the low murmur of voices downstairs, and the sound of spoons clinking against saucers; and he is suddenly taking fright and scrambling out of bed in a hurry.

II.—The Malingerer

He is dressed and is slowly walking down the carpeted stairs, conscious that he has been a long time in donning his clothes, and that he has a doleful expression on his face. Now he is at the foot of the stairs, is crossing the narrow hall, and walking into the dining room.

The table in the centre, covered with the white cloth. The four empty chairs round it. The greasy plates and knives, the curves of toast crust, the broken egg shells, the cups containing wet tea leaves.

. . . They've all finished, he is thinking. . . .

He is walking through the dining room, shuffling to pass through the narrow canyon between the back of a chair and the green papered wall, then sullenly pushing open the door and appearing to the kitchen.

Mother standing near the doorway, hanging the grocer's list on its nail beside the window. Her dark blue skirt and her dark blue silk blouse. Her brown hair. She is turning round as he appears.

"You've been a long time getting up," she is saying, looking at him with puckered brows. "What's been the matter with you?"

He is feeling his littleness beside mother, and is not raising his line of sight above the level of mother's waist.

"Nothing," he is answering slowly.

"Well, I'm sure you'll be late for school if you don't hurry. And you don't want to be late."

He is just standing before mother, mute.

"Don't you feel well?" mother is asking, after a pause.

He is conscious of the unhappy expression on his face as he is shifting his feet on the linoleum and shaking his head.

“What's the matter with you?”

He is looking more worried. “Don't know,” he is answering in a faint voice.

“Got a pain somewhere?”

“No.”

“Well, what do you feel like?”

He is looking still more worried, and his eyes are directed now towards the floor.

“Don't you *know* how you feel?” he is being asked.

He is shaking his head, and observing mother's black shoes and black cotton stockings.

“Just feel ill, do you?”

He is nodding.

“Well, do you think you can eat your breakfast?”

His heart is beating faster and he is vaguely wondering whether he *does* feel well. He is hesitating before making his reply, as though considering whether it would be wise of him to eat breakfast. And he is feeling ravenously hungry. He is shuffling his feet and wriggling his body a little.

“Do you think you could eat a little porridge?” mother is asking, as she is putting her arm round his shoulders and kissing him on the forehead.

“I think I might eat a *little* porridge,” he is saying gently, pressing back all trace in his voice of caring whether he ate a little porridge or went without a bite of it.

“All right, dear, sit down in the dining room and I'll tell Marie to bring it to you. I told her to keep it in the oven till you came down. Perhaps you'll feel better when you've had something to eat.”

He is walking slowly, as befits a person feeling ill, to his chair, and sitting down with greasy plates, egg shells, and toast crusts in his immediate vicinity.

The black marble clock on the mantelpiece is striking on its gong, and he is looking to see that the hands point to nine o'clock.

He is conscious that at nine-thirty school begins. He is feeling strange sitting before the breakfast table by himself and the clock striking nine. On other mornings, he is aware, he is by this time on his way to school. He is feeling as though he has been plucked out of the stream of common school-boys who are on their way to school at nine o'clock and is being given special treatment.

Now the servant girl, Marie, is appearing with a porridge plate exuding steam. Marie's white apron. Her sinewy, hairy arms and hands. Her greasy general appearance, and her odour so different from the pleasant odour of mother. Her smile of greeting to him, her revelation of tooth-less upper

front gums and the brownish looking teeth at either side of her mouth. Her black hair, and the occasional grey hairs appearing amongst it. Her polished nose. Her bright blue eyes. Her atmosphere of energy.

He is feeling a tinge of fear as she is very close to him in setting down the porridge plate in his place.

“Good morning, Marie,” he is saying weakly, but thinking: . . . I don't *really* feel well. I'm not quite well. . . .

“Good morning, Bobbie,” Marie is returning the compliment, and walking straight out into the kitchen again.

He is pouring milk over the porridge and thinking:

. . . Wonder does Marie know? “Oh, I can always find out, Bobbie. You can't deceive me. A little bird tells me about you when you're not telling the truth.” Marie. Little bird. “Can't deceive *me*.” Five past nine. “No home lessons?” She'd have said something if she'd known. Marie. I'm *not* well. I don't *know* what's the matter with me, that's all. “You can't tell that to me, Bobbie. You might deceive your mother but you can't deceive *me*.” . . .

His little hand is slowly grasping the silver spoon beside the porridge plate and very very slowly he is pressing the edge of it into the outer rim of the disc of porridge. But though his hand is moving so tardily, his mind is busy as he is removing piece after piece of porridge to his mouth, and the milk is running into the scooped-out hollows.

. . . Flood, is the word in his mind as the porridge is lying inundated with milk. Noah's Ark, he is thinking as he is espying a wheat husk high and dry on a tiny exposed peak of porridge in the middle. Now the flood's subsided, he is reflecting as he eats. It's an island now. Ocean all round it. This is a harbour just here. This is Sydney Harbour. And that's Manly beach. And that's Bondi beach. And this is Lane Cove River flowing into Sydney Harbour. And now the river goes right across the island. It's a canal, that's what it is, so that ships can sail from one side of the island to the other. Now it's a very wide canal. Suez Canal. It's *two* islands now. I know: Great Britain and Ireland. Aw, I've made Scotland too small. It'll be just England and Wales and Ireland. Now it's just England and Ireland. Now there's only England. Now it's a very small England. Now . . .

Until he is scooping up the remainder of England into his mouth. With the warm porridge inside him, he is feeling happy. But Marie is appearing with toast in a rack, and he is remembering to maintain a doleful expression on his face while she is with him.

. . . Why doesn't she say something if she knows? he is thinking as Marie's back is disappearing round the kitchen door. Dicky bird. “It always tells me about you.” Quarter past nine. “Where are your home lessons?” Aw—won't have to go to school to-day. If Marie knows about me, wonder

will she tell mum? “Marie's told me all about you, Bobbie. Now you pack yourself off to school—this minute. You're a wicked little boy.” Marie. “I can know anything I like to find out.” If Train A travels at fifty miles an hour and Train B at . . .

He is glancing again at the position of the hands on the clock face as he is languidly reaching for a slice of toast.

. . . Just have one slice, he is reflecting as he is reaching for the butter. They'll think I'm all right if I eat a lot. Get a bit of cake out of the pantry when Marie and mum have gone upstairs . . .

Then he is revising his estimate of consumption to two slices; then to two and a half; and now it is silly to leave only half a slice in the rack and he is eating that remaining half as well.

While he is munching, he is conscious of what a splendid thing it is to take as much butter as you like without incurring grave shakes of the head and exclamations of “That's greedy!” He is frequently looking up at the clock and now he is hearing its gong struck once to indicate the half hour.

. . . Huh, school's in, he is thinking happily. Too late to go now. . . .

In his mind he can see himself gloriously free for the day, apart from the restriction imposed on him of appearing to be slightly ill. The blood is flushing to his cheeks as he is realising that the day stretches before him in all its virginity for him to make of it what he will.

Involuntarily he is listening to catch the faint resonance of the distant school bell. There are pictures in his mind of the sudden desertion of the playground except for the appearance of boys running across it to reach their class rooms before the bell stops ringing. He can see Mr. Lutch wiping the black-board, to be ready for the arithmetic lesson the moment the sound of the bell ceases; he can see boys panting and with anxious expressions on their faces as they are hurrying to their desks so as not to invoke the wrath of Mr. Lutch for their belatedness, hastening to swallow a piece of stick-jaw that has lasted all the way from the confectioner's, or quickly extracting a ball of chewing gum from between their teeth to be adhered to the under side of their desk until the eleven o'clock play interval.

As he is slowly turning over the final mouthful of toast in his mouth, however, there are vague doubts in his mind, to which he is only half paying heed. He is hazily wondering whether all the familiar activities of school *do* go on when he is not there as they do when he is there; whether there is a conspiracy from which he is excluded but which involves all the teachers and their pupils, to hide from him what occurs when he is absent. He is conscious that it seems foolish to think his presence or absence makes any difference to the routine of the school. But that little doubt

about it remains.

. . . Aw, how can you tell? he is concluding. . . .

III. Something Important

The kitchen door is being opened and mother is walking into the dining room.

“Well, have you finished your breakfast?” she is asking.

He is dejectedly nodding his head.

“Has it made you feel any better?” And mother is walking to his side and putting her arm round him so that her hand clasps his little shoulder.

The touch of her hand is making him feel that he is quite weak. He is shaking his head in response to her question.

“Well, don't you think you'd better lie down for a little while—on the sofa?” mother is suggesting.

. . . No—rotten, are the words in his mind. . . .

He is making no reply.

“Don't you think that would be better?”

He is conscious of the bright sunlight visible through the dining room window and of the green of the lawn and the plants in the garden round it. He is sniffing, and then saying miserably:

“I think—p'raps—if I sat on the lawn for a bit —I might feel better. I mean, in a deck chair.”

“With a book, I suppose?” mother is adding and eyeing him suspiciously.

“Mmmmm!” he is assenting and feeling happier.

“All right, then,” mother is saying as she is relinquishing her clasp on his shoulder. “But I don't think you're very bad, you know, Bobbie, if you can sit and read.”

“No, it's not that I feel so *very* bad,” he is answering, and feeling virtuous at approaching a closer approximation of the truth. “But I think I'd feel bad if I moved about much. Just for a while.”

“All right,” and mother is walking out of the room, “we'll see how you feel in an hour or so. You *may* be well enough to go to school after the *play hour*.”

His heart leaps. He is feeling dejected again.

. . . Eleven o'clock—play hour. “Where's your home work, Watson?” “Please, sir, I—I—I—I—” “I'll *deal* with you!” Old Lutch. Train A at fifty miles an hour. X to Y. Y to X. Hundred miles. Train A. And Train B at seventy. Not *going* to school. Not if I have to be sick all day. Train A at— —. Train B. “Well enough to go to school *after the play hour*.” Huh, no. Go out on the lawn. Not feeling well. Feel rotten. . . .

He is carrying the green striped deck chair from the tool shed and erecting it on the lawn—carrying it and erecting it very slowly as one might be presumed to do who is feeling ill. Now he is getting his book from his bedroom, carrying it slowly to the chair, and making himself comfortable in the sunshine.

He is sitting for a while with his chest sunk in, his shoulders bent forward, holding his big unopened story book with one hand on his lap, and feeling most unhappy. He is conscious of the green lawn with the asphalt pathway surrounding it and the plants and flowers in the strip of garden to his right, against the red painted brick wall of the two-storied house next door. He is conscious of the scullery leading to the kitchen on his left, and the tool shed, and above him the deep blue sky and the hot spring sun beating on him. There is a picture in his mind of himself maintaining a miserable countenance throughout the day—at any rate, until after lunch. The prospect is depressing him.

Now he is feeling the sun too hot.

. . . Think I'll go inside, he is reflecting. No, don't want to go inside. Don't want to do anything. Wish mum'd go out somewhere. I'd put on those Buffalo Bill trousers if she did. Be Buffalo Bill. Out in the hot sun. Out there in the desert. I know: where he's dying of thirst. It's that hot. No water anywhere. Where he's all alone in the desert but for his broncho, with the sun nearly blinding him. I know: and he's got the baby he's rescued. He's sworn to take it to its mummie. Aw, I'm Buffalo Bill. "I've made an oath to take you home, little babe of the prairie, and by God I will!" And the sand's blowing in his face. And getting in his eyes. "Take me, God, if it's Your will. But spare this little one." "I'll go through hell's fires for you, little mite." And the little baby's crying because it wants its mummie, and Buffalo Bill struggles on. Little baby. Babies. "Little boys shouldn't be so curious." That's what mum said when I asked her. But gee whiz! Marie might know. Marie. Go and ask her, I think. She can answer anything. Nothing Marie doesn't know. . . .

In his mind there is the picture of himself when he asked Marie after he had heard of the death of Grandma, where people went when they died. He can see Marie with a solemn countenance pointing to the kitchen ceiling. "They go up to heaven," she is saying. "And where *is* heaven?" he is asking her. "Up there," Marie is replying, directing her forefinger towards the ceiling again. "You mean in the sky?" from Bobbie. "I do," Marie is emphatically saying.

Now he can see himself when he asked dad where did people go when they died, and can see dad as he answered, "Well that's a thing I don't know. And I don't believe anybody knows."

He can remember himself asking dad, “What is God really *like*?” and dad answering, “I don't know, Bobbie. What do you mean by ‘God’?” “You know, dad. God—He's up there in the sky. In heaven. Don't you know?” “I've never seen God in the sky. Have you?” “No; but He *is* there.” “How do you know?” “Marie says He is.” “Then ask Marie what God is like to look at.” And he can remember himself asking Marie about it; and can see Marie resting on the handle of the broom with which she had been sweeping the kitchen floor. “God,” she is saying slowly, “is an old, old man, with a long white beard. He sits on a beautiful golden throne in Heaven and judges all the wicked people down here on earth. God is very kind to those that love him, but to those that don't, God will show no mercy.”

And Bobbie's thoughts are going on now:

. . . Marie knows everything. She can tell you things that dad doesn't know. Babies. I'll go and ask Marie about *them*. She'll tell me. . . .

He is repressing his impulse to scramble from his chair, run into the kitchen, and shout, “I say, Marie!” Instead he is appearing to get up with much effort, is crossing the lawn as though every step is pain, walking slowly through the scullery, and entering the kitchen to find Marie washing crockery in the tin basin.

“Marie,” he is saying as he is sitting on the chair beside the table at which she is standing. “Marie, where do babies come from?”

He is looking up steadily into her face as he is propounding his question, and is thinking:

. . . Marie knows. . . .

She is not appearing perturbed at his inquiry, and is making no pause in her work of mopping plates and cups and lifting them from the basin on to the large black tray to drain. She is not even returning Bobbie's earnest look.

“Babies?” she is repeating, as she is scraping with a finger-nail a crumb of toast that adheres with particular tenacity to a plate. “What made you think about babies?”

“I don't know, Marie. I've often thought where they came from. I asked mum the other day, and she just told me not to be curious. But I would so like to know, Marie. And I was thinking just now about that Buffalo Bill story I was telling you about—where he's taking the baby to its mother.”

“Yes?”

“Well, Marie, that baby reminded me this morning about it. Where *do* babies come from?”

Marie is taking a knife to help remove the toast crumb.

“Where do they come from?” she is repeating.

“Yes, You know, don't you, Marie?”

“Well, I thought you knew too, Bobbie.”

“No, I don't. Nobody's told me.”

“You've read in the story book you used to have about the stork carrying the baby and dropping it down the chimney.”

“But I can't believe that, somehow. Why, a little baby would be killed if it was dropped down the chimney. And I heard two girls talking the other day, and one told the other that her mother had said she had come down from heaven, when she was a baby, during a terrific storm. I can't believe that, either.”

“Why?”

“Aw, it's silly. How could a baby come down in a storm? This girl said she came down and landed on their lawn, and her mother had shown her the place where she dropped. But she couldn't possibly have been alive if she'd dropped right down from heaven. It's a terrific long way.”

“Well, do you really want to *know* where babies come from?” and Marie is seeking to remove that toast crumb with the potato scraper.

“Yes, of course I do.” Bobbie is feeling excited at the prospect of hearing the truth.

“The doctor brings them,” Marie is explaining, looking from the toast crumb to Bobbie's earnest boyish face.

“Does he?”

“You've seen a doctor carrying a bag, haven't you?”

“Yes, often. Do they carry the babies in those bags?”

“Of course.”

Marie is proceeding with her activities in the tin basin. Bobbie is thinking:

. . . Never thought about babies being in the doctor's bag . . .

There is a picture in his mind of the last time Dr. Bailey came to the house, to stitch grandma's face where she had cut it in falling. He is remembering how the doctor stood his hat upside down on the hall stand, dropped his gloves into it, and walked upstairs with his bag in his hand.

“Marie,” he is asking, looking up again, “do doctors *always* have babies in their bags?”

“Well, no, perhaps not always.”

. . . Mmmmm—he is thinking—there mightn't have been any babies in *that* bag that time. But—how is it——? . . .

“Marie, where do the doctors get the babies from?”

“Oh, they have them, you see.”

Bobbie is at once seeing a mental picture of a room in a doctor's house where the doctor keeps babies. The doctor is frequently coming to the

room, removing a baby from a shelf where it has been stored, placing it in his bag, and taking it away.

“I suppose if people want a baby, they tell the doctor, do they, and he brings one?”

“Yes, that's it.”

Bobbie can see his mother telephoning to the doctor that she desires a baby, and the doctor telling her he will bring one round at once.

. . . But—still—where does the doctor—? Where do the babies really—*really*—? . . .

“But, Marie, where does the doctor *get* the babies? Does he buy them?”

“I suppose he must do.”

“Ha! I wonder how much he pays for them!”

“Not much, I shouldn't think, for you!”

“But where does he buy them *from*? I mean where do they come from first?”

“From God, of course.”

“Do they?”

“Of course.”

“You mean, God makes little babies?”

“Yes.”

“I think I like dear old God.”

“Do you? Why?”

“Because He made *me*.”

“Oh, I think He forgot what He was doing when He made you.”

“He must have forgotten what He was doing when He made *you*, Marie.”

“Now, don't be rude.”

. . . God makes little babies, his mind is proceeding. God. Little babies. The doctor. “Yes, how many would you like?” God . . .

“But, Marie,” he is asking, now, “how does the doctor get the babies after God has made them?”

“Oh, the doctor goes up in a balloon and gets them.”

“*Does* he?”

. . . Never thought of that, are the words in his mind. Up in a balloon. Like I saw go up at the show ground last Easter Monday. Balloon. Right up and up and up . . .

“You mean the doctor goes right up to God?”

“Yes.”

“Do doctors go often?”

“It depends on how many people there are who want babies.”

“I suppose the doctor gets only as many babies as are needed?”

“Yes, that's right.”

. . . Mmmmm! he is musing. The doctor doesn't have the babies in a room. I thought that was silly. Balloon. Right up to God. God makes little babies. Makes them. The doctor. "Do they carry the babies in those bags?" "Of course." If I can, the next time Dr. Bailey comes, I'm going to have a look in his bag—and see if he has any little babies in it . . .

IV. Provocation

As he is walking out of the kitchen, through the scullery and on to the lawn again, he is feeling glad he asked Marie about babies.

. . . Thought Marie 'd know, the words are in his mind. Wonder why wouldn't mum tell me? Doesn't she *know* where babies come from? P'raps mum doesn't know. Mum said, "Little boys shouldn't be so curious." Aw, mum must know. Why didn't she want to tell me? Marie told me at once. Marie always does tell me everything. There's nothing Marie doesn't know. Gee, she's clever. Up in a balloon. I'd like to see the doctor go up in a balloon. Wonder would he take me up with him one day? Huh! Wonder does he ever take other people up with him? If I went up with him I'd see God. Aw, I don't think I'd like to go up with him. Where babies come from. I wouldn't be surprised if Marie knew more than Mr. Lutch. Marie's wonderful. I'm always going to ask Marie if I want to know anything . . .

He is standing on the lawn, looking at the deck chair with his big story book lying in the lap of the canvas.

. . . Don't want to sit down again, he is reflecting. Don't want to read. If there was nobody to see me, I'd ride round the garden on my tricycle. Don't think I'll ride it. Just go into the shed and have a look at it. That won't hurt. Put some oil on the steering. Wants oil . . .

He is walking up the garden path beyond the scullery and opening the door of the shed. The boxes, the wood blocks, the piled lumps of coal, the tins of paint, the tricycle.

. . . Bring it outside, he is thinking. Steering can do without oil for a bit longer. Not that bad . . .

He is guiding the machine through the shed doorway on to the asphalt garden path. He is pressing the saddle to feel the quality of the springs supporting it. Now he is leaning over the saddle and testing its springs with the whole weight of his body.

. . . Nothing wrong with *this* saddle, are the words in his mind. A beauty. Wallingley—and —Co.—Birmingham. Made in England. Better not ring the bell. They might hear it. It's a beauty of a bell, though. Rings as easy as anything. Just the littlest touch on it and you can get it to ring. Press my hand over the gong and ring it then. There, nobody can hear that. Wonder

do the pedals want oiling? Whew! Can't you make them spin! They don't want any oil. Aw, I'll just ride very *very* slowly round the lawn. Only once. Only once round . . .

Very slowly he is mounting the machine and his little feet are very deliberately pressing round the pedals.

. . . This is the slow train between Sydney and Rockdale, he is thinking as he is traversing the four sides of the lawn. Up to Rockdale where Auntie Doris lives. Stops at every station. This is Rockdale . . .

And he is at the shed again. He is dismounting from the engine-driver's cab and seeing how that right-hand cylinder is taking the steam after the strain of drawing seven carriages up the steep gradient beyond Banksia.

. . . Must go back to Sydney, he is deciding. "Hullo, Bill. Are you the new fireman? Well, hop on board. I was nearly going without you. I was afraid of this cylinder on the right here. But I think it'll be safe if we go slowly . . ."

He is mounting the saddle again, and accomplishing the journey back to Sydney just slightly quicker than the outward journey had been. Now he is dismounting at the shed and there are the words in his mind:

. . . "What's that? Engine broken down at Strathfield? And you want me to run up to Strathfield and pull the train back to Sydney? I was just going off for my lunch. All right, I'll take my engine to Strathfield and pick up the train." "Better go at top speed." "Yes, I'll let her go. Just this cylinder here I'm afraid of. Off we go, Bill." . . .

It is involving him in four journeys round the garden path to reach Strathfield. Then he is uncoupling the broken-down engine, hitching his own engine to the stranded carriages, and bringing them back to Sydney central station as instructed. He is aware that the train passengers are very grateful to him, and that some of them are thanking him as he is standing by the side of the engine, inspecting the piston rods.

He is feeling proud of his exploit to Strathfield, and it is not possible for him to resist the temptation to be the driver of the Melbourne to Sydney express picking up a mail bag at full speed while rushing through Bundanoon. He is suspending a flour bag from a hook on the clothes-line post at the edge of the garden path. He has another hook fastened to the tricycle handle-bars. Now he is riding close in to the post, and the hook on the handle-bar is neatly picking off the bag. He is replacing the bag on the post hook, and rushing through Bundanoon again. And again. And again. And again. Now his leg is being pinched in the steering mechanism, and he is losing his temper with the machine. He is guiding it back to the shed, and nearly throwing it inside.

He is emerging from the shed; and now he is espying his sixteen-year-old

sister Judith walking out of the scullery towards him. He is swallowing a lump in his throat, and the words are in his mind:

. . . Never saw me. Never saw me. I put the tricycle away before she saw me . . .

“Bobbie,” she is saying as she is catching sight of him, “what did you do with my book?”

“What book?” And Bobbie's voice is pregnant with suffering, the shadow of his illness again clouding the expression on his face.

“You know—that book I was reading—‘The Romance of Ursula Trent.’ You were looking at it last night. Where did you put it?”

“I didn't put it anywhere. I left it where I found it.”

“You did not, you young fibber. You found it lying on the book-case, where I left it, and you didn't put it back, because it's not there now. *Tell me, now, where is it?*”

“I tell you, I don't know. I left it somewhere in the dining room. I never took it out of there.”

“You had no right to touch it at all. And you couldn't have left it in the dining room, because I've searched everywhere in there and I can't find it. You've hidden it somewhere because I told mother about your taking the raisins out of the pantry.”

“I don't know *where* your old book is. So there!”

“You do, you little monkey.”

Judith is seizing him by the arm and shaking him.

“Tell me where it is!” she is crying. “Tell me, this moment, where it is!”

“I don't *know* where your book is!” Bobbie is declaring, finding it increasingly difficult to look ill, and his cheeks reddening with rage.

“All right, you little devil,” Judith is threatening, grandly, “I'm going this moment to tell mother you're not a bit ill. I saw you out of my bedroom window a few minutes ago riding on your tricycle. You're just shamming, so that you can stay home from school.”

Bobbie's anger is suffusing him like a flame. A picture of the awful Mr. Lutch is thrusting itself into his mind afresh, and in an instant he is seeing himself being sent to school and being caned by Mr. Lutch—just because of Judith.

“*You bloody liar!*” he is shouting at her in self-defence, and only realizing the terrible thing he has said when the words are out of his mouth.

Judith is recoiling in horror.

“Oh, you wicked little brat!” she is exclaiming.

“I'll tell mother, this moment, what you called me.”

And she is running back into the house, and he can hear her faintly, crying in a voice that shakes with emotion, “Mother, mother!”

V. Consequences

His heart is thumping, and he is feeling as though swathed in a mist.

. . . Bloody liar, are the words in his mind. Bloody liar . . .

And he is feeling alternately hot and cold and very excited. He is breathing hard. He is feeling frightened, and is wanting to run away somewhere. But from perversity he is standing as if stuck to the ground, not moving a muscle.

. . . I don't know where her book is, he is thinking. Bloody liar. She *is* a bloody liar. I *don't* feel well. I'm not feeling well just because I can ride my tricycle. I wasn't riding it fast, was I? I *don't* feel well. I'm not going to school. Mr. Lutch. Train A at fifty miles an hour and Train B at —. I'm not going to school now, whatever they do. “Hold out your hand, Watson.” I'm not going. Judith. I hate her. “Mother, mother!” Hope mum's gone out. Judith. Mum. She might tell dad. I *don't want to go to school*. I didn't mean to call her a bloody liar, did I? I didn't think what I was saying. I *do not* know where her old book is. I don't care where it is. But I'm not going to school. I'm not well. That's what made me call her a bloody liar. Though she is a bloody liar, because I'm *not* well. Dad. “I'll give you a good sound hiding, young fellow!” “Mother, mother!” Mum. “I'll tell his father.” I could run away. Could keep on walking and walking until I got right out into the country. In the bush. Could trap rabbits. Light a fire and cook them. Take a box of matches with me. Sneak into the pantry and get a box now off the shelf. I know where mum puts them. Easily skin a rabbit. Take a knife with me. Get one out of the drawer in the side-board. Sleep under a tree at night. Or crawl under a bush—like Angus Pentleson in that story, “Lost Gold.” Could run away just for the day. Come home at night after tea and go straight to bed. Not speak to any of them. Oh, I *do* hope mum's gone out somewhere. And I hope dad's too busy in the shop to listen to Judith. Mum *might* have gone out! If she has, I wish I could do something to Judith before she comes back. I hate that girl like anything. Like to kill her. Wish she was dead. If I could do something to her I would. What could I do? Like to wipe that girl off the earth. . . .

He is indrawing a deep breath and sighing it forth again. The suspense of waiting for something to happen to him is making him feel miserable. He is slowly turning round and walking up the asphalt garden path away from the house, past the shed and towards his little cubby house at the head of the garden.

. . . Bloody damn' liar, she is, he is reflecting gloomily. Not sorry I said she was. Don't care. Do what they like to me. Don't care. . . .

He is feeling depraved as he is allowing himself to have these words in

his mind. Morbidly he is likening himself to the swearing, truanting Sid Linzey at school. In his mind he can see Sid Linzey among a group of other boys who are talking roughly, spitting, and emphasizing their remarks with frequent use of the words, “damn,” “bloody,” and “blast.” He is remembering for how long he has in his mind used these words, but he is miserable to think that he has allowed himself to utter the word “bloody” aloud. And to Judith!

. . . They'll think I often say “bloody” out loud, he is thinking, and sniffing. And I don't. I've never said it out loud before. I'll never say it again. I promise I won't. I'll promise anything I won't. “You naughty, wicked boy!” I promise I won't say it again. “I'll thrash you for saying that word!” I promise I won't say it again. I didn't meant to say it. I don't want to run away from home. I don't feel well, either. I'm ill to-day. I'm not shamming. I feel rotten. Think I ought to lie down for the rest of the day. . .

He is sniffing now before the door of his cubby house. Dejectedly he is raising his hand and pulling open the door towards him. He is standing in view of the revealed interior of the cubby. He is conscious of the green of the next-door garden apparent through the narrow slits between the palings of the fence which forms the back wall of the cubby. He is conscious of the three boxes that represent a table and two chairs. He is conscious of the hobby-horse leaning neglected against the corner. He is conscious that Judith has been gone into the house a long time and that nobody has called for him. And with the consciousness of that he is feeling a little less morose, and his mind is going on:

. . . Mum must have told Judith I was ill and couldn't help being angry. “I'm going to tell mum I saw you a few minutes ago riding your tricycle.” Perhaps mum wouldn't believe her. Serve her right. Hope mum gives her a real good hiding. Hope mum beats her like anything. Beats her until she cries herself silly. Wish dad'd give her a beating. Like him to get hold of the biggest stick he can find—a great big enormous stick—and hit her as hard as he can. Give her bruises all over. If I was a big man I'd beat her myself. Wait till I'm older. I'll give her such a hiding, she'll be frightened to come near the house. She'll want me to let her into the house, but I won't. And she'll have to go and sleep in the park. I won't care. Then she'll die of starvation. Woooo! Won't I be glad! I won't give her even a tiny bit of bread. And she'll be that hungry. And every day she'll be getting weaker and weaker, and I'll be all right. I'll have lovely big meals. . . .

The expression on his face is becoming bright again. He is almost happy.

. . . Perhaps mum doesn't think I've done anything wrong. Only Judith who thinks that. Nothing wrong in swearing. If they heard the way Sid

Linzey swears—. Mum mightn't mind if I always swear. Might not mind if I say damn and bloody and blast as often as I like. Huh! Judith! She thought mum 'd give me a hiding if she told about me swearing. Silly damn' girl. Bloody liar she is. Blast her, I don't care a damn what she says to mum. Or to dad either. If I see that tart out here again and trying to pimp on me, I'll give her a bloody damn' good hiding. I'll take a stick to her. Bloody big galloot she is. Asking me where her blasted book is. How do I know? The silly big fool. “Ooboobooboobo! I'm going to tell mother! Wowowowowowow! I'll tell mother what you called me!” Urrr! The great big silly fool. “I'm going to tell mother! I'm going to tell mother!” That's all she can say. If she wanted a fight I'd give her one soon enough. And beat her, too. Make her nose bleed like anything. Make blood come out of her nose and her mouth and her eyes and her ears. She'd be howling like a bloody great big cry-baby before I was finished with her. But she just runs inside and bawls, “Mother, mother! Oh, mother, mother! Just listen what Bobbie's called me!” Suppose mum said to her, “Judith! Go to your room at once. I won't hear another word from you!” Hope she did. Is that that great big tart calling me? Huh! What's she want now? Good hiding? . . .

“Bobbie!” he can hear from the region of the house balcony.

. . . Aw, what does she want? he is thinking as he is continuing to stand looking into the cubby-house I won't answer her. She can come up here if she wants to speak to me

“Bobbie!” he can hear again from the balcony, in a sharper tone.

“Yes?” he is replying meekly as he is turning round. A tremor of fear is flashing through him.

“Bobbie, father wants you for something!”

“What for?”

“He wants to see you at once. You'd better hurry.”

And he can see Judith disappearing from the balcony through her bedroom door. He is clasping his hands behind his back and kicking his boot into an expanding hole in the asphalt paving of the garden path. Then very slowly he is dragging his feet along the path towards the house.

. . . What does dad *want* me for? he is wondering. To run a message? The errand boy's in the shop. Why does he want me to run a message? “You'd better hurry.” What does he want? If Judith's told dad what I said to her—. Don't believe it *is* that. “He wants to see you at once.” Might be to give me something. Somebody's brought something for me to the shop. Wonder if anybody has. If I thought it was only about what I called Judith, I wouldn't go. Aw, it isn't about that. That's nothing. Can't be that. No harm in saying “bloody.” Wish I knew what he wanted me for. If it *was* about that—. “Wants you for something.” Might be about that steam engine he

was going to buy me. Wonder if it is. "You bloody liar." It isn't about that. Isn't about that. "Wants you for something." Judith. Dad. If I *knew* what he wanted——. Bloody liar. Bloody . . .

His heart is beating fast as he is walking through the deserted scullery and the deserted kitchen and into the dining room. The green cloth on the table. The horse-hair covered chairs against the dark green papered walls. The sound of the heavy varnished door to the hall squeaking open. Dad. His dark brown moustache and trimmed whiskers. His thin, strained-looking face. His bright brown eyes. His angry frown. His brisk movement.

"Oh, here you are!" dad is saying as he is entering the room.

Bobbie's mind has a picture of the shop left in charge of the errand-boy, Wilfred. He can see the magazines and newspapers spread out over the counter, the books standing at the back of the counter, the inks, the pens, the pencils, the pastes, the gilt-lettered black Bibles, the inscription "Printing Dept." over the rear door, the customers having to wait impatiently while dad is here with him.

Bobbie's heart is throbbing. Fear is breaking out over him in spots and flashes. He is looking up into dad's rubicond face.

"Judith t-told me you w-wanted me," he is mumbling.

"Just come upstairs with me!" he can hear dad saying; can smell tobacco and printers' ink; and can feel dad's hand clasped firmly round his arm. His arm is aching with the strength of dad's grip on it. He is half running and being half dragged rapidly out of the dining room, across the carpeted hall, and up the carpeted stairs. His face is flushed and he is feeling excited. He cannot think clearly. He is utterly surprised and very frightened. He is incapable of speech. Even his feelings are confused. He is neither loving nor hating dad. Emotionally and mentally he is bewildered.

Up the stairs. The banister. The pale brown wall-paper. The linoleum-covered landing. The white doors around the landing. His bedroom door. The brass door knob. Dad's brown, bony, hairy hand grasping the door knob. The opening door. His bedroom. The pale blue walls. His wash stand. His dressing table. His chest of drawers. His black iron bedstead. The white bedclothes. The worn mat on the linoleum-covered floor. His chair.

He is being lifted through the air. He is lying face downwards. His abdomen is on dad's knees. His eyes can see two legs of his chair and a pale remnant of pattern on the linoleum. With violent suddenness he is aware that he is being beaten with dad's open hand. He is bursting out into loud crying, from shock more than from pain. And then crying from pain more than from shock. Again and again the heavy hand is striking him, and he is filled with unutterable anger. He is yelling angrily. He is beside

himself with anger. He is surprised at what a big hand dad has, but the words are in his mind:

. . . You beast! You rotten beast! You pig! I'll pay you out, you big coward! . . .

He is almost choking with rage. Now he is being thrust forcefully on to his bed, and he can hear the bang of his bedroom door being shut and the thuds of dad's footsteps on the stairs.

VI. Plot

He is lying on his back on the bed, sore and hot. He is loudly sobbing and gulping, his breath coming in convulsive jerks. He is uttering loud, disjointed cries of rage and sorrow. He is filled with feelings of revenge. The words are in his mind:

. . . I'll pay him out. Teach him to beat me. Burn his old shop down. Burn him to death. . . .

The skin round his eyes is swollen and his eyes are filled with bitter hot tears which are streaming down his flushed cheeks. He is controlling his sobs sufficiently to shout angrily at the top of his voice.

“Oh, you great big coward! You great big pig! You'll be made to suffer! You *will!* You *WILL!* You great big coward! You great big beast!”

. . . What could I do to him? he is thinking as he sobs. . . .

And in his imagination he can see Red Indians that Marie has told him about, burning dad alive. Or,

. . . Like to throw a big stone at him, he is deciding. Right at his head. Knock his head off. Like to fight him. Give him such a punch on the jaw he'd never forget it. Lay him out dead on the floor. If I was a big man I would. Great big coward. Great big beast. Like to kill him. Like to see a great big man come and fight him and kill him. If I had a gun I'd shoot him.

. . . .
He is imagining himself with a gun walking through the private door from the house into the shop, taking aim at dad's head, and firing. He is conscious what a terrible thing it would be to do. But,

. . . I wouldn't care. If I could make that great big beast suffer. The great big coward. . . .

The exercise of his mind is helping him to grow calmer, and he is ceasing to cry, though his breathing is still convulsive and he is still conscious of having been soundly smacked. He is feeling he is a wicked boy, and that it is natural for him to think wicked thoughts. He is conscious of being a boy who uses bad language, gets thrashed by his father, and plans like a criminal a suitably terrible vengeance. His lips are pressed tightly together

and the skin of his forehead is wrinkled in a sullen frown.

. . . Axe, is the word in his mind. I can lift it. I've chopped sticks a lot of times with it. Wait till to-night. Dad 'll be in bed. Creep into his room and chop his head off. . . .

In his imagination he can see the axe and he can see blood; and he can feel the intense satisfaction to be derived from having wiped dad clean out of existence. Now he can remember mum saying to dad, "You know, dear, that axe is as blunt as can be. I wish you'd have it sharpened." But he is determined on his plan to use it to-night.

. . . Be sharp enough, he is thinking. I'll use it. Use it to-night. This very night. . . .

And he is feeling extremely wicked as he is thinking these thoughts. As a justification of them, he is shouting again,

"You great big pig! You big coward!"

. . . Carry the axe up here into my room tonight, he is planning. Then I'll get up in the middle of the night and creep into dad's bedroom, and chop off his head. I'm not frightened. Policeman. I don't care. I'm not frightened of policemen. Gaol. I don't care. Marie. What would Marie say to you? Marie. "Oh, what a wicked boy!" I'm not a wicked boy. Dad has no right to hit me. If he hurts me I'm going to hurt him. Chop his head off. I will, I will. . . .

He is ceasing to have catches in his breath, and he is lying exhausted. Now he is turning over to one side, one of his boots is becoming enmeshed in the bed-clothes, and he is kicking the clothes savagely away. His eyes are fixed on the lower drawers of his dressing-table, and he is thinking:

. . . Wonder does Marie know I used a swear word? Wonder does she know dad beat me? Dicky bird. Perhaps her little dicky bird told her. She always knows everything. Wonder what she'd say if I told her I was going to chop dad's head off. Perhaps she knows I'm thinking of that. *Perhaps she does.* . . .

VII. Lunch

For half an hour longer he is brooding over his proposed decapitation of dad. Then for another half hour he is trying to make up his mind about going down-stairs again.

. . . If I have to go to school this afternoon—might as well go downstairs and have another ride on my tricycle. Train A at fifty miles an hour. But if I stay here for a bit longer, they'll think I'm ill again and I won't have to go to school this afternoon. Have all the afternoon free. Play trains. Make a kite and pretend it's a balloon with a doctor in it. Train B at seventy miles

an hour. Don't *want* to go to old school. Stay up here, I think. I'm not well.

. . .

Soon afterwards the white bedroom door is opening, and mum is appearing round the corner of it.

"So you're here, then," she is saying, frowning severely.

Bobbie's face is as eloquent of ill-health as he can make it.

"You needn't be trying to look sick," mum is adding. "Judith told me all about you, you naughty little boy. You're going to school this afternoon whether you like it or not. You've been a very wicked boy this morning, and I'm glad your father beat you. Now get up off your bed. We're having lunch early. I'm going to town. But listen to me, you're to go to school this afternoon. Do you hear? If I find when I come home that you haven't been to school, I'll tell your father again. Hurry up now, and come down to your lunch."

His heart is seeming to sink and sink. He is touching depths of misery hitherto unplumbed. And now that mum is turning to go out through the doorway again and he thinks she cannot see him, he is poking out his tongue at her and putting his outspread fingers to his nose.

But she is turning instantly and frowning at him.

"If I see you doing that again, you rude child," she is threatening, pointing a forefinger, "I'll take you into the bathroom and soap your tongue for you!" And she is disappearing.

He is feeling a morbid cheerfulness at having expressed his feelings towards mum by outward signs. But he is conscious of being defeated from every angle. Everything seems against him.

. . . "You're to go to school this afternoon. Do you hear?" the words are echoing in his mind. Mr. Lutch. "Oh, you didn't *do* your home lessons, didn't you?" "But, sir, I didn't know how to work out that question about the express trains, please sir." "Didn't know how to? It's very funny that every boy in the class knew except you. It was explained to you how to work out the question. No, that's no excuse. Stand aside there. I'll *deal* with you!" . . .

He is feeling dreadfully unhappy.

Now he is hearing Judith's voice from the bottom of the stairs.

"Bobbie! Mother says you're to come down to lunch immediately!"

He is making no reply, and only thinking:

. . . That tart! If I could get my fingers round her neck, I'd like to choke her. Like to shake the life out of her. The way Buffalo Bill got hold of Bull Tarana, the big Red Indian chief. She's like a great big bird flapping around. . . .

"Bobbie! I've told you now. Come down at once!"

He is poking out his tongue again. Now very sullenly he is swinging himself off his bed, and looking into the mirror above his dressing-table.

The red swollen-looking eyes. The ruffled hair. The wrinkled forehead. The pouted lips. He is blinking his eyes to make them look less red. Now he is wetting his handkerchief in the water jug on his wash-stand and watching himself in the mirror dabbing his eyes with it. He is pulling his comb through his tangled brown hair, finding difficulty in restoring order out of its chaos, and throwing the comb angrily across the brush again.

With a gloomy countenance he is walking slowly down the stairs, and entering the dining room. The white cloth on the table. The flowers in a vase. The knives and forks and plates. The dish with cold ox tongue, the bowl with lettuce and cucumber. Mum, dad, Judith. "How's your appetite, Cecil?" mum is saying to dad. "Oh, not too much for me," dad is answering. Bobbie is sliding on to his chair opposite Judith and between mum at one end of the table and dad at the other.

He is conscious of a feeling of strain round the table. Nobody is taking any notice of him. Everybody's face is solemn. His right arm, which is the part of him nearest to dad, seems to have an ache in it. He has a feeling of wanting to edge away from dad—as though dad were a cold wind.

"Can you eat much, Judith dear?" mum is asking.

. . . Aw—Judith dear, Bobbie is repeating in his mind. Huh! Judith *dear* . . .

"No, only a little please, mother darling," Judith is answering.

. . . Huh! Bobbie is sneering to himself. Mother darling! Just fancy! . . .

No word is spoken as his plate is passed to him, and for ten minutes the only sounds are those of knives and forks clinking against plates.

. . . Awful mob you are, Bobbie is reflecting. All of you got the Joe Morgans? Cripes! Can't any of you say something? . . .

He is feeling very wicked as he is thinking these things. But he is wanting to sneer to himself at everything.

. . . Huh! what a rotten lunch! are words in his mind. This tongue's as tough as boot leather. What a rotten bit of salad. Bread's stale, too. . . .

He is feeling himself an outcast, like a particularly depraved and ungrateful convict permitted to dine at the table of a highly respectable family. He is sitting carelessly on his chair, cutting his ox tongue and his salad in a slovenly way, and when he has transferred a portion to his mouth, is masticating it with a feeling that he is some brutal dweller on the plains of the far, wild West, or some half-savage pirate munching a mouthful of glass to appear the more ferocious. He has a feeling of being bad through and through.

It is giving him a strange sensation to look slyly up at dad now and then.

It is making him conscious of his proposed deed this evening. He is becoming fascinated by looking at dad's neck, and cannot refrain from noticing several features in connection with it.

Its redness. The three pimples on it: one right at the back, between the top of the starched collar and where the hair begins; another just below the line of the jawbone; the third, of the kind that come to a sharp point, visible just under the chin, whenever dad moves his chin while eating.

He is finding it uncanny to look at dad's neck, and he does not wish to do so, but he is unable to resist the fascination. Round the back of the neck, there is hair of a fair length, but at the front there is only bristle. On the whole, the skin round dad's neck looks tough—coarse. Bobbie cannot help observing this. He cannot stop his mind from remembering the bluntness of the axe in the shed and connecting it with the obvious toughness of the skin on dad's neck. He is feeling that he does not want to go through the business of chopping dad's head off while he is in bed tonight, but he has determined on it and he does not feel in a mood for forgiveness. He is trying not to let his mind dwell on the toughness of dad's skin and the bluntness of the axe.

He is glad when he is hearing the errand boy, Wilfred, calling, "Shop, Mr. Watson, please!"

Dad is frowning and saying in a low tone, "Drat the people! Why do they always want to come at meal-times? They must know I'm having lunch."

"Don't let them annoy you, Cecil dear," mum is imploring.

. . . Wish they'd have a row over it, are the words in Bobbie's mind. . . .

Dad is beginning to whistle on his way from the table to the shop, but Bobbie is aware that dad is only feigning not to be annoyed and he is feeling quite happy about this. He is feeling superior as he notices the strained expressions on the faces of Judith and mum. He is feeling that he is the only member of the family who is not unhappy.

Dad is now walking back into the room and sitting again in his place. The strain of no conversation is becoming unbearable to Bobbie when mum is managing to ask,

"Has there been anything more in the paper, Cecil, about the murder at Derrigan?"

"Well," dad is saying, looking up from his ox tongue and salad, "you know the police arrested a man named Mulling after a struggle, and charged him with murder?"

Bobbie's mind is at once occupied with the image of a policeman struggling to arrest Mulling—Mulling with a knife, the policeman with a baton. Mulling is about to stab the policeman when the policeman executes a deft twist of Mulling's wrist, and the murderer's knife is falling quivering

into the floor—just as he has read in one of the weekly story papers out of the shop.

“Mulling has now made a confession,” dad is continuing. “It's all in the paper this morning. I'll let you see it.”

Bobbie can see Mulling, with a drawn, dejected countenance, seated disconsolate—a beaten man—on a stool in his prison cell, confessing to a policeman, who is writing the story of the confession in his notebook. Like the last scene in that story, “Daggers and Daring.”

“What has he confessed?” mum is asking.

Bobbie is looking quickly towards dad to learn what Mulling has confessed.

“It's very gruesome,” dad is saying, as he is chewing ox tongue and salad.

Bobbie can see Mulling's hands smeared with blood, thick, clotted blood, and Mulling himself staring at those blood-stained hands.

“Mulling says, of course,” dad is relating, “that he didn't murder the man. He says the man shot himself.”

Bobbie can see the pink cover of last week's “Thrilling Tales Library,” on which is depicted a man falling back, one hand flung outwards, the other holding a smoking revolver which is falling away from his head.

“Then it seems,” dad is saying, “that he thought he'd better get rid of the body in some way.”

Bobbie can see Mulling with the dead body in his arms, looking this way and that, wondering where he should put it.

“So,” dad is continuing, pulling off a chunk of bread and popping it into his mouth, “he sliced the body into several parts.”

“Oh, how dreadful!” mum is exclaiming.

Bobbie's heart is beating a little faster at the dreadfulness of it.

“One part,” dad is going on, “he put into a pot and boiled.”

Bobbie can visualize Mulling bending over the pot to see if the contents had quite boiled.

“Another part he put into a suit-case and threw into a farmer's field.”

Bobbie can see Mulling doing that, too.

“A third part he wrapped up in brown paper and left in a park; and the head he locked in a portmanteau and left under an assumed name at a railway station cloak room.”

“Oh, Cecil!” mum is exclaiming. “Don't tell us any more! How disgusting! How perfectly disgusting!”

“It's all in the paper,” dad is excusing himself, shrugging his shoulders as he is putting his empty plate on one side.

While he is eating rhubarb and custard, Bobbie has embarrassing pictures in his mind. He can see himself as Mulling trying to dispose of a dead

body, and finding much difficulty in doing so, eventually getting greatly distressed about it. On the whole he is not attracted by this man Mulling. He can see him now as a man with a fiendishly grinning face—a frightening face. He is feeling that he does not want to be associated with this kind of man. He is feeling glad he is sitting at home rather than in a prison cell like Mulling. He is feeling a great respect for policemen. He is feeling that he does not want to fall foul of a policeman, for he is sure that policemen are very clever and never fail to get the man they want.

Altogether he is feeling glad he has resolved not to carry out his revenge on dad until night.

VIII. In Retreat

It is afternoon, and Bobbie is sitting on one of the three boxes in his cubby house, and leaning over a second box, the biggest of the three. The ten little scarlet-tunic'd tin soldiers, with joins down their fronts, are lined up in front of him across the top of the big box. The little toy cannon between him and the soldiers, its muzzle aimed at them. One of his little hands holding the cannon, the other pulling and releasing the trigger. As he is firing the cannon, he is thrusting its muzzle at each soldier in turn.

“You're dead! You're dead!” he is muttering as the tiny army's ranks are decimated, attenuated, and finally annihilated. Now he is picking up the defeated warriors and reforming their battle line; but in his mind are the words:

. . . Mum will have gone to town by now. Going to stay here, though, until school's out. That tart Judith'll be poking about if I show myself. “Remember, you're to go to school this afternoon, Bobbie.” Huh. If Train A is travelling at fifty miles an hour——. “If I come home and find that you haven't been to school, I'll give you a good sound beating.” Aw, she won't know. Tell her I've been. Huh. “If ever I catch you telling me an untruth——.” “Yes, mum, I was at school all this afternoon.” She won't know. At school. From X to Y and from Y to X. Not going. “Good sound beating.” Don't care. She won't know. Not going, anyway. . . .

His heart is very heavy as he is annihilating the ranks of the little tin soldiers again. The prospect of spending a couple of hours in his cubby house, and not daring to appear outside it during that time is not attractive. And already his military operations are beginning to pall on him.

He is hearing faintly from a distance the sound of a bell ringing, and, . . . School's in now, he is ruminating. Mr. Lutch. “All in your places. History books open at chapter three. You begin, Erskine.” The Normans. William the Conqueror, ten sixty-six. William the Second, Rufus, ten

eighty-seven. The Normans. The Norman invasion. By this time the Normans——. Battle of Hastings. Normans. The Norman king. Normans. The Normans Now they're all killed. Everybody's dead. And now they've all been swept by an avalanche over the precipice into the gorge below. And crash! over goes the cannon, too . . .

And soldiers and artillery are falling with a tinkling sound to the floor.

. . . Don't know what to do now, he is thinking wearily, and sprawling his arms over the late battlefield. Wish I was at school. No, I don't. If it wasn't for old Lutch. Train A at fifty—. X to Y. In their hundred-mile journeys. Wish it was after four o'clock. Then I could ride on my tricycle. No, tell you what I'll do this arvo. Start making an underground room—right under here. Oo yes. Opium den, like in that story, “Pearl of the Underworld.” Could have a room all under this floor. With steps to go down to it. Oo, and it'll be all dar-r-k as anything. And then have a dark narrow passage out of that room into another room under the garden. Could dig it out and nobody would know. Have room after room, all the way down under the garden. Oo, fun! Then, perhaps one day mum'll be digging in the garden, and suddenly—suddenly!—she'll find herself in a big dark room! Won't she get a fright! And have big, thick, red carpets hanging down over the walls, and thick carpets all over the floors and in the passages. All warm and cosy as anything. And have lovely big cushions all over—in every corner. And beautiful women in beautiful silk dresses lying about and smoking opium. Oo, wouldn't it be a treat! Just have a pale red light everywhere. And I could go down and lie on the cushions and smoke cigarettes. Nobody'd know. Or what about building another storey on to the cubby? You could have another storey, and then another on top of that, and another and another. And have a lift to go right up to the top storey. Stop at every floor. Fun, eh? Millinery, boots and shoes, ladies' underclothing, corsets, on the right. Going up. The lift's full, madam. Fifth floor. Dress materials, carpets, furniture, skirts and blouses. Going up, please. Take the next lift, please, madam. Sixth floor. Tea room and restaurant. Going down, please, going down. Or what about having a great big high look-out, just? And have a rope ladder to climb up to the top. Like a ship. Tell you what. Be better. Make the cubby into a steam-ship. Funnels at the top. The roof could be the main deck. Down here, this will be the cabin. A steam yacht. Like in that story, “The Stolen Treasure Ship.” And make a room under here, and that'll be the engine room. Have a fire down there, and I could be shovelling coal, and there'd be real smoke coming out of the funnels. Or, I tell you what I'll do . . .

But through the open door of the cubby he is seeing his black and white cat, Patches, crouching on the garden path, ready to spring. Now he is

seeing her dart forward, and he is hearing the twittering of a bird. He is jumping up from his seat and running out to where he can see Patches with a fluttering sparrow in her mouth. Little fluffy feathers are falling to the ground. He is feeling a rush of pity for the little sparrow, and uncontrollable anger towards Patches.

“Patches, you naughty cat!” he is saying, and is bending down and trying to pull her jaws apart from the bird. Patches is growling over her prey, and resisting his efforts. “Let it go!” he is crying. “Let it go! Let it go! The poor little thing! You savage brute. Let it go, I tell you!”

Patches is continuing to growl and her teeth are like a vice in the sparrow's sides. The bird is giving a last convulsive flutter. Bobbie is grinding his teeth in rage.

He is turning quickly round. The stick standing against the side of the cubby. His little hand is seizing it, and he is beating Patches over her back. She is dropping the sparrow and bolting down the garden path. He is running savagely after her with the stick. The sight of the abandoned sparrow motionless on the ground is filling him with righteous anger.

The cat is darting into the shed. Bobbie is running in there after her. The gloom of the interior of the shed. The coal pile. The wood pile. Among the wood blocks, the two green shining eyes.

He is feeling outmanoeuvred. Patches is growling at him as he is approaching. He is striking her again with the stick—as hard as he can.

“That'll teach you!” he is crying. “Teach you not to touch the dear little sparrows!”

Patches is spitting at him, her ears back, and with a quick dart of her paw, she has made a thin crimson scratch across the back of his hand. Now she is springing farther back among the wood blocks in the gloom of the far corner.

“Oo, you savage little beast!” he is exclaiming wrathfully, feeling the stinging pain of the scratch on his hand. “I'll teach you not to do that.”

He is feeling afraid to go near Patches again, and his fear is making him desire all the more to vent his spite on her. He is frowning angrily and his heart is beating fast. Now he is picking up a lump of coal and throwing it as hard as he can at the pair of green eyes in the gloom of the corner. He is feeling reckless of the consequences of Patches being struck by a heavy lump of coal, and is only angered the more when the coal hits the wall of the shed.

He is throwing another lump of coal at her, which thuds against her body and is acknowledged by a hissing and spitting from her. Again and again he is throwing lumps of coal at her—throwing them with all his might, and conscious only of his desire to do as much harm to her as he can. There is a

succession of hisses and spittings from Patches as the coal is repeatedly striking her. He is feeling enraged that the cat remains undefeated, and is clenching his teeth and pitching a heavy block of wood right in her face. Now he cannot see those two green eyes nor any dark form behind them, and instead of defiant hisses and snarls, he is hearing plaintive mee-ows.

He is realizing that he may have put too much force behind that last heavy piece of wood, and his heart is beating hard for fear of the consequences of it. But he is saying sternly:

“Perhaps that will teach you not to hurt pretty little birds. You naughty, wicked cat!”

He is walking slowly out of the shed, is looking up and down the garden path to make sure he is not observed, and is walking back to his cubby again. He is breathing fast from his excitement, and his hands are trembling. In his mind the words are insistent:

. . . Killed the cat. Patches. Dead. “You naughty child!” “Oh, you cruel boy!” Killed. “Just pelted it with coal.” “I’ll give you such a beating for that.” “Naughty boy.” Naughty. The cat. . . .

He is outside his cubby and is bending down over the fluffily feathered form on its side, with a ring of feathers surrounding it which are moving in the wind.

“You poor little bird!” he is sympathizing, and is picking up the feathery bundle, holding it in his palm and stroking it. There is no movement in it.

He is carrying the little creature into his cubby, is laying it on the table, and is sitting on one of the boxes and stroking the tiny feathered back afresh.

“Poor little bird!” he is repeating. “Poor little bird! What a dear little thing!”

As he is continuing to stroke it and no life shows, there is moisture in his eyes.

. . . *Must* be dead, he is concluding. . . .

But his mind is going on to say to him,

. . . Cat. Killed. Wicked. Cruel. Naughty child. Good beating. Father. Just pelted it to death. . . .

IX. Ha'penny

More than half the afternoon has gone over and he is hearing boyish voices growing in volume and dying away as the owners of them are walking past the back gate. He is feeling a sudden rush of cheerfulness, and he is thinking,

. . . School's out. Hurray. Go and ride my tricycle. Wish I had a

ha'penny. Go and buy a waddy with it. . . .

And in his mind there is a picture of a six-inch stick of pink hard sweet substance flavoured with peppermint and concealed under a thin layer of chocolate; and he is imagining the delicious sensation of "waddy" being sucked in the mouth. He is feeling the need of a waddy very badly.

He is walking out of his cubby, over to the back gate, opening the gate and shutting it loudly again, then strolling back to his cubby.

. . . They'll think I've just come back from school, he is reflecting. Wish I could get a waddy. Wonder would dad give me a ha'penny? Beating. Head off. Axe. Shop. Like to ask him. Waddy. "Can I have a ha'penny, dad, please?" "Please, dad?" "Can I?" "A ha'penny?" "Please?" "For a waddy?" "Just a ha'penny?" Wish I could ask him. Chop his head off. No. "Please?" Good sound beating. "Yes, I've been to school." "Can I, dad, please?" "Here you are, here's threepence. Get what you like with it." "Oh, thank you, dad." Get a couple of waddies. That'd be a penny. Two sticks of spiral joy. That'd be another penny. And I know, a couple of licorice straps. "Please, dad?" . . .

He is trying to summon courage to broach the subject of the halfpenny to dad, and at length the prospect of success and the ensuing delight of tasting "waddy" are overcoming his diffidence in doing so. He is leaving the cubby and walking down the garden path, into the scullery, through the kitchen, into the dining room, out across the darkness of the passage, is opening the shop door, and is walking down the worn wooden steps into the office behind the shop. The desk and the chair beside it. Dad in the chair, writing. The samples of printing suspended from the walls. The brown linoleum on the floor. The spike files laden with dusty papers hanging from nails in the white-washed brick wall above the desk. Dad turning round to observe his approach.

"See what that customer wants, will you?" dad is saying to him.

"All right," and he is feeling happy that dad has not spoken sternly.

He is walking into the shop, behind the varnished wooden counter thickly arrayed with newspapers, periodicals, and magazines. His mind is going on:

. . . "A ha'penny—please?" "Can I have ——?" "Can I?" "Please, dad?" "Please, can I?" . . .

He is facing a young lady who is saying, "Is this week's 'Happy Days Stories' out, please?"

He is saying, "I think so," and is looking for the familiar blue cover among the variety of publications before him.

. . . Happy Days Stories, his mind is saying. Happy Days. Happy Days. "Please, dad?" "Can I?" Happy days. "Just a ha'penny, dad, please?"

Happy Days. Here it is. "Please?" . . .

"Thank you," he is saying as he is receiving a penny in his hand in exchange for the blue-covered little book, and the young lady is walking out of the shop.

He is blushing as his hand feels the penny in it.

. . . "Can I, dad?" his mind is pursuing. "Can I have this penny?" "Where shall I put this penny, dad?" "Shall I put this penny in the till, dad?" "Do you want this penny, dad?" "Just this penny?" "Can I, please?" "Do you want me to put this penny in the——?" "Please?" "May I, please, have just this——?" "Need I put this in the till, dad, please?" "Can I?" . . .

He is walking back along the passage behind the counter and into the white-walled office, where dad is still writing at the desk. He is walking slowly and is feeling very nervous. In his mind are the words:

. . . Chop. Head off. Thrashing. Dad. "Great big beast." No, no. "Can I, please?" "You bully! You big coward!" Didn't hear me saying that. "You great big pig!" Couldn't have heard me from my bedroom. "Please, dad — please?" Chop his head off. I don't mean that. Never meant to, really. I like dad, really. "Please?" He's a good sort. Dear old dad. "Can I, please?" "Have this penny?" "Keep this penny, dad, please?" I like dad. "Can I——?" . . .

Dad is still writing, and Bobbie is looking intently at a calendar with a big red figure "9" beneath the inscription "October, 1894," and at the words at the top of the calendar, "C. S. Watson, *The Printer and Stationer*, Lackard Street, Claverley, Sydney, Australia." He is scarcely aware of the details of the calendar. His heart is thumping, and his mind is going on:

. . . "Dad, please?" Waddy. "This penny?" "Can I——?" "Please, can I——?" "Would you let me keep this—this——?" "Please, dad?" I like dad. Yes, I do really. "Please?" . . .

He is turning half round and seeing that dad has finished writing, and is folding his written paper. Bobbie is walking to the side of the desk.

. . . "Can I?" "Please, dad?" "Please?" his mind is saying. . . .

He is swallowing something in his throat and his heart is going bump! bump! bump!

"Dad——!" he is beginning in a voice that is faint and trembly.

"Bring me a packet of envelopes," dad is saying to him; and he is walking dejectedly to the counter and taking a packet of envelopes from a box beneath it. He is bringing the packet to the desk, handing it to dad, and, "Please, dad——" he is beginning again.

"See what number Clarence Street those people are over there—on the calendar," dad is telling him, and he is finding the number and calling it to dad. Back at the desk,

“This penny——” he is starting afresh, but dad is writing on one of the envelopes. Now he is blotting the writing, gumming a stamp on the envelope, and saying,

“I want you to post this right away. There's a clearance of the pillar box in a few minutes.”

Bobbie's feelings are turning from uncertainty to definite despondency, but his heart is thumping as hard as before.

“Da—dad—would you—can—I—I——?” he is appealing weakly, the stamped letter in his hand.

“Eh?” dad is saying, turning round.

“This penny——”

“Eh?”

“I just took—from that customer—to—to get—something? Can I? Please, dad?”

“Eh?”

“Keep it, dad—can I?”

“The *penny*?”

“Yes, please. Can I, please, dad?”

“Yes, all right.”

“Oh, thanks, dad. I'll post the letter.”

He is running along at the back of the counter, out at the end, across the shop floor, into the street, and towards the bright red pillar box at the edge of the pavement at the corner twenty yards away.

. . . Waddy, his mind is saying. “Two waddies please.” Or a waddy and a stick of licorice. Licorice. Waddy. Good sort, dad is. I like dad. Chop his head off. No-o-o-o. Never really meant that. Never intended to really. Waddy. Stick of licorice. . . .

X. The Truth

He is sitting on his chair in the dining room, drawn up at the table set for high tea. The fading daylight of early spring. The white cloth, with the creases in it where it has been folded. The plates, the cups, the slices of ruddy German sausage on the dish. The open exercise book before him, with the drawing of a steam ship. The pencil in his hand, the point of it describing little port-holes one after the other along the ship's sides.

. . . Two funnels, are the words in his mind. And a lot of lifeboats slung up above the deck. A big passenger ship. A lot of cabins, first class and second class. Who's this? Mum, I wonder? . . .

He is hearing several knocks on the front door, and now the sound of footsteps up the hall, the click! of the door being unfastened, Marie's voice

saying, "Good evening, ma'am!" and mum's voice returning, "Oh, good evening, Marie." Now there is the sound of the door shutting, of footsteps returning down the hall, and the squeak of the dining room door opening.

His heart is beating harder than normally. In his mind are the words:

. . . School this afternoon. "Yes, mum, I did go." "Yes, mum." "Like I told you to." "Yes, mum." Make a bridge, too, on this ship. "Yes, mum." "Yes." . . .

He is looking up from his drawing to see the hatted figure of mum walking into the room.

"Oh, the tea's all ready—that's a good thing," she is saying, and panting as she is setting down parcels on the arm-chair beside the fireplace, and now withdrawing long pins from her hat, pulling her hat off, laying it on the parcels, and gently rearranging her hair.

"Well, Bobbie," she is saying, and walking towards him, "what are you doing with yourself?"

"Oh, just drawing a ship, that's all."

"Let me see it." And mum is looking over his shoulder at his efforts at nautical representation. Now she is sitting on a chair beside him, and putting her hand on his arm.

"Listen, Bobbie," she is saying. "I suppose you went to school this afternoon like I told you?"

He is drawing a lifeboat suspended above the deck of his pictorial steam ship.

"Well, what do you *think*?" But he is not looking at her.

"I'm not thinking anything. I'm asking you did you go to school this afternoon? And I don't want you to tell me anything but the truth."

"Why—you don't think I wouldn't go, do you?"

"I don't know. I hope not. After what I said to you."

. . . Good beating, are the words in his mind . . .

He has finished one lifeboat and is beginning to describe another.

"Did you or didn't you go, Bobbie?"

"Of course."

"What do you mean by 'of course'? You mean you did go?"

"Mmmmm!"

He is drawing a line for the keel of the lifeboat, and now upward strokes for the davits on which it hangs. Mum is not moving away, and is silent for a while.

He is feeling a dullness and heaviness over him. He is extremely unhappy, and is not really caring at all about the steam ship or the port-holes along it or the lifeboats above the deck. Now mum is turning to him, putting her hands gently on both his arms, and turning him round to her.

“Bobbie,” she is saying earnestly. “Look me in the face. You haven't really told me straight out whether or not you've been to school this afternoon. Have you been or haven't you?”

His eyes are directed to the emerald brooch in the breast of her dress. He has not more than glanced at her face since she came in. His mind is going on:

. . . School. Mr. Lutch. This afternoon. Train A at fifty miles an hour, and Train B at——. X to Y. “Give you a good beating.” And from Y to X. “Have you or haven't you been?” School this afternoon. . . .

“Look me in the face and answer me, Bobbie dear,” mum is repeating.

But he is not looking up, and observing instead the way the green cotton is threaded through mum's mother-o'-pearl buttons.

“*Bobbie!*”

“I said!” he is suddenly declaring with defiance, without removing his line of sight above the region of the buttons.

“You haven't answered me properly. You've mumbled something, and I don't know what to think. Look up at me. Bobbie! Do you hear? Look into my eyes.”

He is feeling desperately miserable as mum is lifting up his chin; but his eyes are still lowered, and he is seeing the tiny perpendicular lines across her under lip, and wondering vaguely whether on his own lip there are little lines like those.

“You are a vexing child! I don't know what to do with you. Look straight into my eyes, Bobbie, and tell me whether or not you have been to school. I want to know the truth. I don't like you not telling me the truth. If you tell me the truth, I promise you I'll not punish you. But I'll punish you if you tell me lies. I just want you to tell me the truth. If you haven't been to school, say, ‘Mother, I haven't been to school.’ If you *have* been to school, you can just tell me—properly. But I'll find out whether or not you're telling me a lie. Now don't be frightened. Tell me the truth.”

He is feeling weighted down with misery. There are the words in his mind:

. . . Not been to school. You don't understand. Mr. Lutch. Train A at—. Didn't know how to do the sum. Mr. Lutch. You don't know what he's like. Train B. “Promise I'll not punish you.” Punish. Punish you. “If you tell me the truth.” Punish. “No, I didn't go to school.” “Good sound beating.” “You to go to school this afternoon.” Not punish you. *Punish*. Not going to tell anyone. She doesn't know I haven't been. “And I'll not punish you.” The truth. “Tell me the truth.” Not punish you. Good beating. She won't understand if I do tell her. Haven't been to school. But I'm not going to tell her. . . .

“Bobbie! Have you been to school? Look up into my eyes.”

His countenance is the picture of dolorousness. Sullenly and dully he is looking into her steady brown eyes. He is feeling it a terrible effort to do so.

“Of course I've been to school,” he is doggedly forcing himself to say. His heart is thumping, and he is feeling that his cheeks are flushed.

“All right,” mum is saying a little wearily, removing her hand from under his chin. “That's all I wanted to know.”

She is patting him on the shoulder. He is turning round to resume his artistic efforts with his pencil. She is bending over him and kissing him on the forehead. He is taking no notice of her caresses, and is proceeding to depict another lifeboat.

. . . “Of course, I've been to school,” his own words are echoing in his mind. Mr. Lutch. It's no good telling her anything. “I'll not punish you.” Huh. Let her find out. I didn't *want* to go to school to-day, because I hadn't done my homework. But what's the use of telling *her*? She wouldn't understand. “Not punish you.” Yes, that's what she says. That's what she *says*. . . .

XI. Uncle Jimmy

It is half an hour later, and mum is sitting in her place at one end of the dining table, Judith is at one side, and Bobbie is opposite Judith. Marie is setting down the tea pot on its stand, and mum is dropping the cosy over it. Now Marie is walking out of the room, and the door off the hall is squeaking open and dad's voice is saying:

“Guess who's here!”

They are turning their heads to see dad's bearded, smiling face in the doorway.

“*Who's* here?” mum is repeating, and smiling, too.

Someone is pushing dad away, and there in his place is a tall broad figure in a grey suit—a man with a bushy grey beard and grey hair, with a smiling, radiant countenance, and bright shining eyes.

“Uh—uh—Uncle *Jimmy*!” Bobbie is shouting, and running from his chair across the room.

“Uncle Jimmy, eh? Uncle Jimmy!” the tall man is laughing, and catching the boy up in his arms. He is walking into the room as mum and Judith are leaving the table to meet him, and is holding Bobbie above his head, then bringing him down and kissing him. Bobbie is all athrob with excitement and is feeling thrilled with the brush of that long grey beard against his face and the smell of cigar smoke from those robust lips. The big hands

holding up his body make him feel delighted.

“Well, well, well!” Uncle Jimmy is exclaiming. “You're growing almost too big to lift now. You were only a light weight when I was here last.”

Bobbie is finding himself set down on the floor again, surrounded by the forms of mum, dad, and Judith, who are crowding round Uncle Jimmy. He is feeling elated in the highest degree with what Uncle Jimmy has said, and the words are recurring in his mind as he is jumping excitedly beside the tall figure and looking up into the bearded jolly face:

. . . “Growing almost too big——.” “You were only a light weight——.” “Too big.” A big boy. . . .

“I weigh four stone one, Uncle!” he is declaring. “And I'm exactly four feet high! Uncle—I weigh four stone one—Uncle—four stone one. And I'm four feet high—four feet—four feet high. Uncle—four stone one!”

But his information is not distinguishable above the medley of voices over his head saying,

“Oh, Uncle Jimmy!” “Jim! Just fancy you turning up!” “Mum was saying just the other evening——” “It seems ages——” “Give you a surprise!” “Ha, ha, ha!” “All this time——” “Yes, just landed this morning.” “We thought you'd been——” “Thought I'd come along——” “Had no idea——” “Just going to begin——” “Just this moment sat down——” “Don't go to any trouble——” “In a moment for you——” “Just this minute——” “Hadn't we, Judith?”

“Four stone one, Uncle Jimmy!” Bobbie's voice is repeating.

“Are you really, old fellow?” Uncle Jimmy is at length looking down at him to say.

“And I'm just four feet high exactly.”

“Well, that's wonderful!”

“Do sit down, Jim,” mum is begging, and to Judith: “Judith, dear, run and tell Marie to lay another place.”

“Yes, make yourself at home, James, old man,” dad is saying. “I don't know whether you like German sausage. If we'd known you were coming——”

“Oh, please don't go to any trouble for me,” Uncle Jimmy is imploring, holding up his hands.

“Lay a place for Mr. James next to Miss Judith,” mum is saying to Marie, as she is appearing from the kitchen.

“Oh, no!” Bobbie is crying. “Let Uncle Jimmy sit next to me. Next to me, mum. Next to me. Mum—next to me. Aw yes, mum. Next to me, Uncle Jimmy.”

“What a child he is!” mum is exclaiming. “All right, Marie. Lay for Mr. James next to Bobbie.”

“You're going to be next to me, Uncle Jimmy!” Bobbie is loudly informing. “Oooooor! I'm going to have Uncle Jimmy next to me. Aren't I, Uncle?”

“Yes, I'm going to be next to you, Bobbie!” Uncle Jimmy is saying, patting him on the shoulder.

“I wish you wouldn't make so much noise, Bobbie!” mum is frowning at him.

“Hooooooo!” Bobbie is pouting.

“Sit down, Jim,” mum is suggesting to Uncle Jimmy.

There is a scraping of chair legs against the linoleum until everyone is seated round the table.

Bobbie is feeling proud of his position next to Uncle Jimmy, and in his mind are the words:

. . . A big boy. Exactly four feet high I am. I measured myself a fortnight ago at school. With Fred Erskine. And I weigh four stone one. Uncle Jimmy. Four feet high exactly. . . .

“Jim has just returned from New Guinea, Ellen,” dad is remarking to mum as he is lifting off discs of German sausage on to the top one of a pile of plates in front of him.

Bobbie is looking with renewed interest up at Uncle Jimmy's grey bearded face, and there is in his mind an impression of an island with tall coconut palms round its edges, with a thick jungle of undergrowth in the interior, and shiny black savage people moving among the undergrowth.

“Of all places in the world—New Guinea!” mum is exclaiming, as she is dispensing milk into tea cups.

“Where *will* you be going to next, Uncle Jim?” Judith is wanting to know.

“I do get to some out-of-the-way corners,” Uncle Jimmy is admitting, and Bobbie is smiling admiringly up at him.

“Whatever is New Guinea like, Uncle Jimmy?” Bobbie is asking.

“Oh!” And Uncle Jimmy is accepting his plate of German sausage. “It's a very hot place, Bobbie, where there are cannibals, and crocodiles and alligators, and monkeys and all kinds of queer animals.”

“Is it?” Bobbie is saying, his mind filled with the picture of a broad river with the heads of crocodiles and alligators appearing on its surface and monkeys sitting in the riverside trees. “But, Uncle, what are cannibals?”

“Cannibals, Bobbie? They are savage tribes of people who eat people they capture—roast them and eat them.”

“*Really?* Like in ‘Robinson Crusoe’?”

“Of course.”

“And have you seen the cannibals?”

“Ah, I've seen plenty of them,” Uncle Jimmy is smiling, and beginning to knife the rim of shiny crimson skin off a slice of German sausage.

“I wish you'd get on with your tea, Bobbie,” mum is saying, and drawing his attention to the plate of sausage slices in front of him. “There's plenty of time later to talk to Uncle Jimmy.”

“I expect you've had some queer experiences,” dad is remarking to Uncle Jimmy, and as Bobbie is taking up his knife and fork there is a picture in his mind of uncle Jimmy holding a tribe of thirty or forty desperate cannibals at bay single-handed. One of the savages is sneaking round to spear him in the rear, but Uncle Jimmy is swiftly turning and shooting him dead with a revolver shot.

“Oh, yes,” Uncle Jimmy is admitting to dad. “I've had a lot of very funny adventures. But first of all I want to know how are you all? You look very well, every one of you.”

“Just getting on from day to day,” mum is smiling as she pours out tea. “We're much the same as when you were here a couple of years ago.”

“I see you've still got Marie.”

“Yes, Marie's very faithful to us.”

“Just the same as ever, I suppose?”

“Oh, she won't alter.”

“Ha, ha, ha!” Uncle Jimmy is laughing, and Bobbie is smiling as if he saw the joke and at the same time trying to think of anything that can be funny about Marie. In Bobbie's mind, Marie appears as a serious figure. “I often laugh to myself about Marie,” Uncle Jimmy is going on to say.

“Oh, she annoys me sometimes,” mum is declaring.

Bobbie is looking up at mum, and feeling most interested to hear that mum has actually at any time found Marie annoying. It is a new experience to learn that Marie can cause anything but respect and awe.

“Do you remember the last time I was here, the way I strung her on?” Uncle Jimmy is asking, in the midst of his consumption of German sausage.

“Oh yes, I do,” mum is laughing. “And wasn't it too funny for anything?”

Everybody is laughing at the recollection of this remote event. Bobbie is laughing because the others are laughing; but is feeling doubtful whether he is being quite fair to his conception of Marie's dignity and importance.

“You can't ask that girl a blessed thing but she has an answer for you,” dad is declaring, looking up from German sausage. Bobbie is turning to him with half a smile on his lips. He is trying to appear to understand the joke about Marie, but in his mind he is utterly puzzled.

“Yes,” Judith is confirming in a sophisticated way, “she knows everything.”

“Nothing that *Marie* doesn't know,” mum is contributing, and Bobbie is looking at mum and feeling surprised that mum has now expressed what he himself has always felt about Marie.

“Do you remember,” Uncle Jimmy is asking, “the day I told her I'd been to the theatre and seen ‘As You Like It’? ‘Oh yes,’ says Marie, ‘my sister has been to that. It's by Mrs. Henry Wood, isn't it?’ ”

Everybody is laughing, including Bobbie, though he is not sure what there is to laugh about.

“And there's nothing about God that she can't tell you,” dad is saying. “Or about angels and archangels and all that they're doing all day long and what hymns they're chanting at any hour you like to inquire!”

Bobbie is joining in the laughter again, feeling that it is the proper thing to appear to be amused at anything said of Marie. Yet he is still puzzled why.

“Yes,” Uncle Jimmy is adding, “I remember I asked her what caused the thunder. Oh, she was quite sure that the thunder was God's voice warning people of their wickedness. And I think the lightning was a token of God's wrath.”

“It's not only those things, either,” mum is saying. “If I want to order some special brand of marmalade, for instance, she's almost sure to have a brother whose wife has a cousin who knows a man who is in touch with a friend whose son is an office boy in the marmalade factory, and so she knows that that kind of marmalade is all gelatine. If it's a patent medicine I want, she is sure to know for a fact that it's only rusty water. And if I tell her I'm going to any particular shop for shoes, she is bound to know somebody who makes them and that the soles are only cardboard.”

“There's nothing Marie doesn't know,” Judith is declaring; and Bobbie is smiling up at Uncle Jimmy as though he were as much in the ring of the joke about Marie as anyone.

XII. His Lot

In the sitting-room, and he is kneeling beside the fender and looking into the fire. The pale brown chunks of wood, and the bright flames darting up and up amongst them. The crackling and the spluttering, and the live sparks shooting out over the hearth. The glowing yellow-pink under the burning wood. His eyes are fixed on those fascinating hot caverns and palaces. Faintly from the dining room he can hear voices, and he is very happy.

. . . Uncle Jimmy, his mind is saying. Cannibals. New Guinea. Ugh, cannibals. Eat one another. Aw, just fancy. Cannibals. He's going to tell us

all about the cannibals. “. . . A lot of very funny adventures.” . . .

He is rubbing his hands in delighted anticipation as he is watching the flames, and the caverns under the flames. He is screwing up his face in glee.

. . . Ugh! he is thinking. When I'm a man I'm going to see the cannibals. And I'll fight them. You see if I don't. I wouldn't be frightened of savages. If a cannibal were to touch me, I'd give him such a hit over the head——. I'm going to ask Uncle Jimmy ugh a whole lot of questions. Ask him about everything I can think of. Find out all about cannibals, and alligators, and crocodiles, and monkeys. Wooooo! Uncle Jimmy. . . .

He is turning as he hears footsteps and the door brushing open over the carpet. Mum in the doorway. She is saying quietly,

“Bobbie!”

He is experiencing inner qualms, but,

“Yes, mum,” he is responding.

“Come here to me,” mum is saying, advancing only a step across the carpet.

A tremulous excitement is seizing him as he is scrambling to his feet and walking towards her, looking up into her face. The expression on mum's face is seeming to him very calm.

“Yes, mum?” he is saying, consciously looking to have nothing to hide, and hoping against hope.

“Bobbie,” mum is saying sternly, “you're a very, very naughty little boy. You told me you went to school this afternoon, and you didn't go at all. Judith saw you in the middle of the afternoon walking out of the shed. You've told me a deliberate story. I feel very vexed and grieved about you.”

The lines of his face are drooping, his mouth at the corners is depressed, the skin of his forehead is wrinkled in a frown, and his feelings are like a grey cloud over his head. His eyes are riveted on the buttons of mum's dress. He is making no reply, but in his mind words in defence come:

. . . “I did go to school. Judith's a liar.” . . .

“You needn't be frightened,” mum is going on coldly. “Nothing is going to be done to you now. But just wait—wait until you want something for your birthday; and then something for Christmas.”

. . . I don't care, he is thinking. . . .

“And now I think you'd better go off to bed,” mum is adding.

“Can't I stay and listen to Uncle Jimmy?”

“No—you'd better say good-night to Uncle Jimmy. And there's another thing. Marie says poor Patches has come in with a horrible lump on her head. Marie is very concerned about her. It looks as if she's been hit by

something. I suppose you haven't been throwing anything at her?"

"Of course not. I didn't *see* the cat the whole afternoon."

"All right. I just thought I'd ask you. Now kiss me good-night and go and say good-night to Uncle Jimmy."

Depressed and sullen, he is touching her cheek with his lips, then walking out of the room into the gloom of the hall, and meeting the tall form of Uncle Jimmy emerging from the dining room.

"Well, Bobbie!"

"Good-night, Uncle!"

"Going to bed? So early as this?"

"Yes. Good-night, Uncle."

"Good-night, little man."

They are shaking hands, and Bobbie can still feel the tight squeeze of that big warm hand as he is turning and walking back up the hall. Only his sullenness is saving him from tears.

. . . "Very, very naughty boy!" the words are echoing in his mind. "Just wait until you want something for your birthday—Christmas." I don't really care. That steam engine. Aw, my birthday's months off yet. Christmas, too. That steam engine. . . .

His eyes are moist as he is turning round up into the dimness of the carpeted stairs. The deepening gloom of the staircase, ending in pitch darkness at the top. The vague, glowering terror of that darkness. His increasing sense of fear as he is slowly treading the steps up and up into it. In his mind he is conscious of a huge man in black armour mounted on a huge black horse. Horse and rider are towering over him, overshadowing him, as he is doggedly climbing on. There is a great long lance in the armoured man's hand, and Bobbie is on the verge of feeling the point of it touch his back. He is walking faster up the stairs, but the black horse and its black, armoured rider are as close as ever on his heels. Memories of the day's conversations keep recurring in his brain:

. . . "Mulling . . . It's very gruesome. . . . He sliced the body into several parts. . . ." "Roast them and eat them." Cannibals. Alligators. Crocodiles. "It's very gruesome." Mulling. Very gruesome. . . .

His heart is beating hard as he is stepping on to the landing, groping hurriedly for the handle of his bedroom door, and quickly walking inside. The black horse and its rider are still towering over him, and he can see in his imagination the face of the criminal Mulling, and see Mulling's hands covered with blood.

His own little hands are shaking as his fingers are feeling feverishly for the match box on the dressing table. The armoured man seems to be right over his head. The darkness is oppressing him.

Now his fingers are feeling the familiar texture of the match box. His brain buzzing with excitement, he is opening the box, fumbling to get out a stick, at length picking out a stick, scratching the head of it against the side of the box, and obtaining a light. Not daring to look behind him, and conscious of Mulling's imagined grinning, fiendish red face, as well as the silent horse and its rider, he is swallowing a lump in his throat and hastily mounting the chair beside his dressing table, reaching up and turning round the tap of the gas bracket on the wall, tremblingly applying the lighted match to the gas jet; and a blue and crimson plume of flame is leaping and whistling towards the ceiling.

With a hand less trembling, he is more leisurely turning round the tap of the gas bracket until the whistling blue and crimson plume is subduing itself into a gently purring blue and crimson fishtail.

XIII. Bed

He is in bed, lying on his side. His eyes are closed, and he is not wanting to open them for fear of seeing that dark mounted rider, who seems now to be just above his shoulder. As he is waiting for sleep to possess him, his mind is ruminating gloomily:

. . . About those cannibals. And about the alligators and crocodiles. Uncle Jimmy. Judith'll hear all about them. That tart. She must have seen me when I ran into the shed after Patches. "A very, very naughty boy." That steam engine. I don't care. Anyhow, they don't know I threw all those pieces of coal at Patches. Not going to tell them, either. "Didn't *see* the cat the whole afternoon." They don't know who hurt Patches. Marie. Little dicky bird. They just don't know. Marie. Don't believe Marie knows either. Huh. Marie. "A little dicky bird always tells me." Don't believe Marie *does* know. Uncle Jimmy. "I often laugh to myself about Marie." Wonder why Uncle Jimmy laughs at Marie. Don't believe Marie *does* know about Patches. Or she'd have told mum. She would. Little dicky birds. A-w. How *could* a little bird talk to Marie? They were all laughing like anything about her. I wonder why. Don't believe little birds *do* tell Marie things. Too silly. I can't believe it. She doesn't know about Patches, anyway. Not so sure she knew I stayed home from school this afternoon. Judith who saw me. Like to bet Marie didn't know. Uncle Jimmy. "Do you remember the last time I was here, the way I strung her on?" "Wasn't it too funny for anything!" Wonder why they *were* laughing about Marie? "As You Like It." "Oh yes, that's by Mr. Henry Wood, isn't it?" Aw, I know why they laughed about that. Shakespeare wrote "As You Like It." Huh, huh. Fancy Marie not knowing that. Aw. Marie. "By Mrs. Henry Wood." "Laugh to myself about

Marie.” Uncle Jimmy. Mum. “Nothing that Marie doesn't know.” “By Mrs. Henry Wood, isn't it?” Didn't they laugh when Uncle Jimmy said that! Marie *doesn't* know everything. “Can't ask that girl a blessed thing but she has an answer for you.” “Yes, she knows everything.” Babies. Up in a balloon. Doctor goes right up to God. I don't believe that. Thought it was silly. Fancy anybody believing that. Aw. Marie. Fancy. Doctor goes right up to God in a balloon. That's just silly. Marie's just got an answer for everything. But she doesn't really know a thing. “Laugh to myself about Marie.” “Mrs. Henry Wood, isn't it?” Marie's just stupid. . . .

His reflections are not making him happy, for he knows that through them he is losing something—losing an impression that he has had for years, of Marie as a wise woman to whom nothing was too profound for her to have the most wonderful information on. In place of that golden impression there is only in his mind now one of a smelly, greasy-looking servant girl with no front teeth and with a stupid expression on her face.

And as he is falling asleep he is aware that he has lost an illusion.

Chapter Two: The Youth's Day

I. Trousers

On a morning in the summer of 1901, seven years later, he is sliding on to his chair at the breakfast table in the dining room.

Mum to his right at the head of the table: the 22-year-old Judith opposite him. Dad's place opposite mum unlaid. Mum lifting the tin cover off the plate in front of him and displaying faintly steaming scrambled egg.

"I don't suppose there's much heat in your breakfast," mum is saying. "What have you been doing?"

"Oh, just getting dressed."

"Oh, mother, he's put on his new suit—with the long trousers!" Judith is making the discovery.

"So he has. Stand up and let us have a good look at you."

"Aw-w-w-w!" and he is taking up his knife and fork and cutting into the scrambled egg and toast.

"Don't be silly," from Judith. "We want to see you."

He is dropping his knife and fork with a clatter on to his plate, scrambling up from his chair, walking out to the wall, turning round, and returning and sitting down again.

"There! Seen them?" he is saying, and resuming hold of his knife and fork.

"Well—that *is* a way to show us!" mum is exclaiming and staring at him.

"I think he looks quite nice in them." Judith is making him blush as he is chewing scrambled egg and glancing up at her sharp features, her thin lips, her black hair.

. . . Young man, are the words in his mind. Grown up. In long trousers. . .

"I'd like your father to see you in them," mum is remarking, as she is pouring a cup of tea. "I told him I'd bought you the suit."

. . . Dad—diabetes, the words come into his mind . . .

Mentally he can see "The Firs" Hospital, and dad's bearded face on the pillow of one of a row of beds in a long ward.

"Are you going down to see father to-day, mother?" Judith is asking mum; and mum is answering:

"Yes, I thought I'd go to the hospital this afternoon. Is there anything you want me to say to him?"

"Would you ask him where does he order tissue paper from? Somebody asked for some yesterday afternoon, but I couldn't find it anywhere, and I

suppose we're out of stock.”

“Isn't it a nuisance! Yes, I must remember to ask him. Though Dr. Ellworth says we mustn't worry him about business.”

In his mind Bob is still seeing the bearded face of dad on the pillow of the bed.

“I think it's just that he mustn't be excited,” Judith is seeking to explain. “On account of his heart, of course.”

“Yes, I have to be so careful what I say to him. He worries so easily. I can't help being worried about the business myself. I'll be glad when you've left school, Bob, and can help your father. He'll never be quite the same again. Dr. Ellworth told me he'd never be able to do as much work as he used to.”

“Why, what can *I* do?” Bob is asking, looking up from his egg.

“You must learn all you can about your father's business, so you can take the work from him and leave him more freedom.”

“Me go into the shop?” he is screwing up his face to confirm.

“Of course. And not only the shop, but the printing department as well—the whole business. You're getting a big boy now, you know—fifteen years old. It's time you were thinking about earning your living. Don't you think so?”

He is conscious of his long trousers, and he is feeling extremely grown up and important. But in his mind there is an impression of galleys of metal type, of odorous proof sheets, of odorous pitchblack ink, of banging, clattering, printing machinery, inky and oily, and of a roughly-boarded, paper-littered, cold and untidy floor.

“Oooor! I can earn my own living all right,” he is asserting. “But I'm not going to be just a *printer*.” And he is half smiling at the suggestion.

“Why not? What's wrong with being a printer?”

“I want to be something more than that.”

“That's just nonsense. When you grow up you'll be able to own your father's entire business.”

He is conscious again of his long trousers and his consequent importance, and conscious with this of the utter unimportance of a suburban stationery and printing establishment.

“No-o-o!” he is exclaiming, and putting aside his empty breakfast plate. “No good to me.”

“I'm sure father will want him to go into the shop,” Judith is putting in. “*I* won't be able to be here much longer.”

. . . Married, his mind is saying. . . .

“I know his father will be very grieved if he doesn't want to help him,” mum is agreeing. “What do you *want* to do for your living?”

He has a fleeting impression of hurrying off to the city and engaging in a large way in “business.” But the impression is vague.

“Oh, *I* don't know!” he is confessing, and still feeling vastly superior to all establishments in suburbs.

“Well, I've thought about it for a long time, and your father and I have often talked about it,” mum is saying. “We both made up our minds years ago that you'd enter the business as soon as ever you'd finished your schooling.”

“You never said anything about it to me before,” he is defending himself, as he is eating toast.

“What would have been the use? You've been far too young.”

“O-o-o-o-r! I don't want to be *just a printer*. Huh! It's—oh—it's *nothing*. A printer! Who wants to be a printer?”

“It's no use your going on like that. I dare not imagine what your father would say if he heard you.”

“O-o-o-o-r!”

“It would break his heart if he thought you weren't going to carry on this business that he's worked so hard to build up. I wouldn't think of telling him. I'm not so sure it wouldn't be his death.”

“You should have spoken about it before.”

“You've been too young to know your own mind.”

“Well, now I'm old enough. I'm fifteen.”

“And I'm telling you now.”

“Well—well—I say—what I say is that I don't want to go into the old beastly shop!”

“It's too late to talk about that. Your father's made up his mind on it. And I'll be very disappointed if you don't do what he wants.”

“You—you—you didn't tell me before—and now—now—you tell me—you tell me—you tell me it's too late now. It's too late you say now. You never told me before. And now when you do tell me it's too late.”

His lips are quivering as he is trying to nibble toast, and there is moisture in his eyes.

Judith is shaking her head. “Mother, he's just too silly for anything. I wouldn't take any notice of him when he goes on like that. He doesn't know what he wants to do.”

“I do know what I want to do!” he is retorting angrily.

“What?”

His mind is in a flurry of indistinct pictures of himself filling an important position in a big office. He is feeling that it is hopeless to try to convey to mum and Judith just what he means.

“I want to be—I want to be—something—more than a printer—and

stationer. I want to do something bigger than that. I want to do something—big. I want to get on. Who wants to be stuck away in a place like this all his life? Never be anything. Stuck behind a counter. Or in an old printing room. Never be able to do anything *really*.”

“Oh, you'll come off your perch some day,” Judith is offering the opinion. “You're very high and mighty this morning.”

“If I knew what you wanted to be, I could understand you,” mum is saying. “But you haven't anything definite you want to do. I can't think that any other boy wouldn't jump at the chance of owning a properly established business.”

“O-o-o-or!”

“Anyhow, your father isn't going to be strong after his illness, so you—well, you'll *have* to go into the shop. You'd better make up your mind about it,” and mum is reaching for the butter.

The black marble clock on the mantelpiece is striking its tinkling gong, and he is looking up at it in sudden fright.

. . . Eight o'clock! his mind is saying. You'll miss the tram for school. . . .

With beating heart he is hurriedly drinking down his tea, springing up from his chair, bumping his lips against mum's cheeks, declaring, “Good-bye!” and running out of the room.

II. Tramcar

He is sitting in a corner seat of a compartment of the steam tramcar, moving along Lackard Street and past Six Ways Cross on the way to town.

The hum of the wheels running along the rails, the rattle of the sliding window doors at either side of each compartment along the two cars of the tram, the vibration and squeaking as the wheels grind against the curves of the rails round the corner of Bullper Street, the metallic panting of the little steam engine, the sharp cessation of that panting and the gradual loss of speed until the tram is jerked to a standstill at a stopping place, with a greater rattling of the doors than ever. The banging back of the doors and the clambering entrances of passengers, the shrieking of the conductor's whistle, the squeal of the whistle on the engine roof, the renewed panting through the funnel, the jerking forward of the tram to the accompaniment of more rattles from the doors, and the resumed hum of the wheels running along the rails. And with stops and starts and whistles and panting and rattling, the progress through Bagley Junction and through Oxford Street and to town.

The bright summer sunshine through the open doorway of his compartment. The sun is shining full in his face, and he is feeling the great

heat of it and blinking his eyes and drawing his straw hat with the school badge on the blue band of it, farther down over his forehead. Now the tram is grinding round a curve and the sun is slowly deserting him and he is left in the cool of the shadow.

The expression on his face is one of disinterestedness; but his eyes are absorbing every detail of the street scenes flowing past the window, and of the passengers entering and leaving the compartment.

. . . That's not a bad-looking girl, he is deciding. Nice figure. Getting into our compartment? Yes. My long trousers. Young man. Judith. She said I looked quite nice. The old school. Past it now. Wonder what they'd say if I walked in wearing long trousers? "You go to the City College now, do you?" "Yes, sir." "Yes, yes, I see." "Yes." "*Leaving* school soon, are you? Business, eh? Be getting on well soon, I suppose." "Position in the city, you know." "Oh, yes, yes." Well, I'm not going into the shop. I've never wanted to do that. Anybody can be a printer and stationer. Can judge for myself now—what I want to do. Young man. Selfish. Self-centred. Well, I didn't ask him to work up the business for my sake, did I? If I don't want to break dad's heart, I have to be a suburban shop-keeper for the rest of my life. I hate the shop and the printing and everything. Wish I'd left school. Sick of school. With all those kids. I never learn anything. I could get a place in the city and earn a jolly lot every week. That shop. Mum treats me as if I were still just a kid. A young man. Long trousers. These trousers look all right? I could easily pass for eighteen if I applied for a position. Wish I was going to work now. I feel grown up. I *am* older in my ways than most boys. You're only a kid as long as you go to school. With a badge round your hat. Everybody knows you're just a school kid. It's rotten. I'm just as grown up as lots of men. I've got just as much sense. Wait till I earn some money. You just wait. If I was working there wouldn't be all this Latin stuff to bother with. Learning poetry, too. What were those lines again? With that straight up the hill there rode—two horsemen drenched with gore—er—and—er—in their arms a helpless load—er—a wounded knight they bore. I'm too old for school. Those two girls in the next compartment giggling like anything. Never find boys giggling together like that. Girls are enormously different from boys. Boys always have something serious to talk about. And boys are always so full of sex feelings. Some kids are just awful. Girls don't know anything of that sort of thing. Pure. Innocent about all that. Their minds are pure. Their thoughts are pure. Not like boys. Boys are little beasts. Wouldn't it be an awful shock to a girl to know what boys think about? They'd never believe it. Their pure minds. What was that French again? *Bois, bois, boit—er—er—buvons, buvez, boivent*. I'm not going into the shop. That's an end to it. . . .

He is feeling very dignified in the consciousness of his long trousers; the steam engine is panting on out of its funnel; the doors are continuing to rattle; the wheels are humming over the rails. . . .

III. Prisoners' Base

He is sitting on a wooden bench against the college wall in the dinner hour. He is eating the last bite of his last sandwich and shaking the serviette from his trousered lap, folding it, and jamming it into his pocket.

The row of chewing and chattering boys on either side of him. The wide area of brown, pebbly, trodden earth stretching before him, glaring in the hot sun, and the groups of noisy and gesticulating boys standing or moving about in it.

While he is chewing he is talking to the two sandwich-eating, knicker-bockered boys on either side of him. All three are speaking at the same time. He is talking very loudly, conscious of his long trousers in comparison with his companions' knicker-bockers. He is experiencing thereby a feeling of expansion. His head is held higher and bolder than usual. He has a feeling of his brain being very big and clear, and that the knicker-bockered boys beside him are very young and very, very small.

“—All rot about Baxter,” the talk is going on. “—You forget the time he——” “—They ought to——” “—Got five sixers——!” “—Chuck him out——” “—It wasn't——” “—No good——” “—Five sixers——” “—I tell you——” “—At the wicket——” “—He did——” “—It was three sixers——” “—Can't bowl——” “—And don't you remember——” “—And it was on a ——” “—For tarts, either——” “—The time when he——” “—Dead easy wicket——” “—When we were——” “—Clean bowled Gordon——” “—Oh, you're thinking——” “—Playing against King's——” “—It was when we were——” “—Of Perkinsey——” “—Murford hit him a——” “—Playing against North's——” “—You've got them——” “—Beauty and he ——” “—It *was*——” “—All mixed——” “—I tell you——” “—That wasn't Baxter——” “—*And he missed it!*”

His having got in the last word is making him feel elated, and the consciousness of his long trousers as he is crossing his legs and pushing his hands into his trousers pockets is making him feel more elated still. As he is looking out over the wide playground there is in his mind a passing impression of himself being in “business.” He has a feeling of being already half-way towards leaving behind all this atmosphere of chattering school boys, of inconsequent talk about school boy sport, of teachers and punishments, of lessons and efforts to acquire uninteresting knowledge.

Three boys are walking up to where he is sitting.

“How about a game of something, you mob?” one of them is saying.
“Come on, Wilson.”

“And you, Scotto,” another is urging. “And you, Watson. Come along.”

Bob is still conscious of his long trousers and of his desire not to spoil them with undue severity of movement. He is shaking his head and declaring:

“Not me. Leave me out.”

“O-o-o-h don't be a nark! What's the good of just sitting here?”

“No, I don't want to play. Get somebody else.”

“Prisoners' Base. We'll play prisoners' base.”

“Come on, Watson, you're on our side.”

“Yes, come on, Watson.”

Reluctantly and regretfully he is consenting to participate in a game of prisoners' base, in which one team of boys runs off and hides, while the opposing team sets off and endeavours to round up the units of it and return them to the base.

Amid the noise of voices as the sides are being picked, he is subconsciously determining to play with a minimum of rushing about.

Now he is running with the other boys composing his team, and they are disappearing from their opponents' base, round a corner of the college building, and separating from one another with subdued cries of intentions and plans. He is running off with Scott.

“Scotto !” he is crying. “Come on !”

They are moving quickly together, Scott in his grey knicker-bocker suit, his Eton collar—his hair fair and ruffled, his face sunburnt to a dark tan.

“Into old Ned's room,” Scott is panting.

“Aw, bound to find us there. Tell you what, into the gym.”

“No good. First place they'll look. Let's go round the back of the tuck shop.’

“That's where I got caught the last time. Most of them know that place.”

“I know,” Bob is saying. “Over into the park.”

“They might say that's not fair.”

“No, they won't. Come on.”

They are running through the college gates, across the road, and scrambling up the grass embankment of the park. Bob is feeling not very particular whether or not hiding in the park is considered to be fair. There is a feeling in him that he is above this boys' game of prisoners' base, and is superior to fairness or unfairness regarding the playing of it. He is feeling that he is playing just to please.

“Better get down somewhere we can't be seen,” Scott is advising, as they are tramping over the park lawn and past park seats and people sitting on

them.

Bob is feeling himself the superior of Scott and feeling that the decision of a place of concealment should come from him. He is looking around, casting about for somewhere to hide that will completely baffle the efforts of the opposing team to discover, some place that will flatter his feeling of being above school boys and school boy games, of being far too clever for them.

He is seeing where the park wall forms a corner and is high enough to screen anybody sitting low at the bottom of the park embankment—a cosy hiding place.

“I know,” he is crying. “Let's nick down there.” And he is pointing to the spot.

They are half running, half sliding down the grass embankment and dropping into a sitting position with their backs to the wall.

“Never find us here!” Bob is panting and smiling, his eyes bright and his cheeks flushed.

For a while they are enjoying the sensation of their seclusion. Now Bob, looking up the embankment, is seeing two boys walking along the top of it.

“Who's this?” Bob is whispering.

“They're not playing,” Scott is declaring. “Mindon! Ferriss!” he is shouting. “Hooroo!”

“Hallo!” And the boys addressed are stopping and spying the seated Scott and Bob. “What are you doing down there?”

Mindon and Ferriss are scrambling down the embankment and dropping themselves in front of the other two.

“Don't show us up!” Bob is remonstrating. “We're supposed to be playing prisoners' base.”

“Oh, gee! Sorry!” Mindon is apologizing, and Bob is observing the shape and cut of Mindon's long trousers and the long stockinged legs of the tall knicker-bockered Ferriss.

“You ought to have been with us a few minutes ago,” Ferriss is saying, and Bob is looking up into Ferriss's smiling, dark-complexioned face, his dark brown eyes, and his straw hat pushed off his fore-head.

“Why, what you been doing?”

“We were just over there opposite the business college, and we met a couple of tarts. They talked to us. I'll bet they're hot stuff. They were in a hurry. They had to get back to the business college. But I'll bet a chap could do anything he liked with them. Hot as mustard. We made an appointment to meet them here in the park at seven o'clock on Saturday night!”

“Catch *me* there!” Mindon is smiling cynically. “Wouldn't touch either of

them with a forty-foot pole.”

“Oh, I don't mean to meet them!” Ferriss is exclaiming, his face serious.

Bob's face, too, is serious, as his mind is picturing the situation described and he is feeling what his imagination is bringing up as the probable sensation of talking to two girls that are such “hot stuff.” He is curious to know more, but he is not willing to exhibit how curious he is.

“*Decent* looking girls?” he is asking in a casual voice.

“Dashed nice looking,” Ferriss is informing him.

“Oh, they weren't much,” Mindon is moderating. “I can get hold of tarts a lot better than that any time—any time I like.”

Bob is looking at Mindon with interest and wondering at his ability to obtain good-looking girls so easily. He is not commenting on Mindon's observation, and leaving it to be assumed that he is quite as sophisticated as Mindon on the subject. He is wishing, however, to go more deeply into the matter, and is glad when Scott is keeping the talk alive by saying,

“Those sort of tarts are no good, though.”

“Oh, I wouldn't go with one of them,” Mindon is declaring. “No good to me.”

Bob is asking “Why?”

Mindon is turning to him quickly. “And have to pay a good bit every week for the upkeep of a baby?”

“There needn't be a baby,” Scott is putting in.

“You can never be too sure, no matter what you do. I know a chap now who has to pay seven and six a week. No good to me.”

“Oh, there needn't be a kid if you're careful,” Ferriss is declaring emphatically. “It's not that so much. But who wants to be diseased?”

“Diseased?” Bob is repeating.

“Always a big risk of that with these tarts,” Ferriss is saying authoritatively. “You never know. And it's an awful thing.”

“Break out in big sores all over you,” Mindon is adding. “I've never seen it, but I've been told about it.”

“I was told that you can have big holes eaten into your body,” Scott is saying.

Bob is feeling disappointed that the romance of the subject of going with girls who are “hot stuff” is so clouded with the possibility of such a loathsome consequence.

“Oh, you can *die* with it,” Mindon is assuring.

“It's a rotten thing,” Ferriss is summing up.

“But do you mean to say——?” Bob cannot help beginning.

“I don't say you might not be all right if you could be sure what sort of a girl you were with. But it's too damned risky for me.”

“*Oh* yes,” Mindon is agreeing. “I know plenty of girls who are willing, but—I’d never have anything to do with them.”

“Ha, ha!” Ferriss is exclaiming. “Listen to you! How about the tart you told me you were with the other night?”

Ferriss is looking at Mindon and laughing, and Bob is regarding them both with a smile on his face. Mindon is laughing, too, at his affected indifference to the charms of loose girlhood being exposed.

“That wasn't the first one, either,” Ferriss is pursuing.

“That's enough, now,” Mindon is laughing, and pushing Ferriss over on to the grass. Ferriss is recovering himself and delivering a punch on Mindon's chest. Now they are tusselling, while Scott is encouraging them with cries of “Go on, Mindon, give him one! Oooooo! what a beauty! Go on, Ferriss! Go on, Ferriss!”

Now Mindon is holding off Ferriss at arm's length, and exclaiming, “Now—now—speaking seriously—speaking seriously—I don't think it's necessary to go off with little tarts in parks—all girls are interested in this kind of thing.”

“Oooooor—no!” from Scott.

“I tell you they are. Girls are just as curious about boys as boys are about girls.”

“No, no, they're not,” Ferriss is shaking his head.

“Do you really think girls *are*?” Bob is asking Mindon.

“You believe me. I've had enough experience. I used to think that girls were just pure, chaste creatures. But that's all rot.”

“You mean to say that girls think about boys and talk about them as much as boys about girls?” Bob is questioning and frowning up at Mindon.

“Of course. Every bit as much. You get a couple of girls talking by themselves. It's just human nature.”

“I can't believe it.”

“Neither could I once.”

“I don't believe you're altogether right, Mindon,” Scott is saying, and Bob is feeling doubtful about it.

But now there are boyish cries from the top of the embankment.

“There's Scott! Down there! And Watson! Come along! Grab them! There they are! Don't let them go!”

Bob and Scott are scrambling to their feet and making off. Scott is away off up the embankment. Bob is pulling himself over the stone wall. His heart beating with excitement, and with a voice yelling not far behind him, “Stop him! Stop him!” he is dropping down on to the pavement on the other side.

He is running as fast as he can across the road, over the opposite

pavement, and through the college gates. He can hear the sharp crack of running footsteps fast on the sound of his own.

. . . Into old Ned's room, his brain is saying. No. Up the spiral staircase. Who is it after me? . . .

He is springing down the worn stone steps leading under the main college building, dashing out of the passage at their foot into another passage, sprinting along the stone floor and round up the spiral stairway in the dim recesses of the end of it. Up the stairs, two, three, at a bound, emerging into the main entrance lobby, then into the big hall, right through as fast as he can run, out through the far door, down into the passage leading out of it, full tilt out through the door at the end of this passage into the open air again. He is striding down the wide stone steps four and five at a time, and then both his feet are off the steps, he is flinging out his arms wildly and is conscious of the sudden shock of sliding face downwards over the ground at the bottom of the steps, and of his nose and his knees smarting.

He is lying stretched out for a few seconds, his mind confused, his heart and his head thumping, and his breath coming in gasps through his open mouth.

. . . Oh gosh! his mind is saying. Knocked my nose in? Came a snorter. Anyone after me! I don't care. Nose *broken*? Gee, my knees. Dislocated something? . . .

He is raising himself on one hand and touching his nose.

. . . Huh. Skin's broken. Stings like anything. Those bloody steps. In my new suit, too. That silly fool running after me. I didn't want to play. My knees. Stinging. . . .

He is raising himself up further and looking down at his knees. Amost in consternation he is seeing the ragged tear in the middle of one trouser leg, and his scratched and bleeding knee poking through the aperture.

. . . My new trousers, he is thinking with awe, and swallowing in his throat. Those damned steps. My new trousers. Torn my new trousers. Mum? Oh Lord. . . .

An impression is flashing through his mind connecting the torn trousers with his listening to talk about consorting with immoral girls, and bringing up the first event as God's punishment to him for the second. . . .

IV. Animal

At half-past three he is walking out of the college gates.

“Ooorooo, Scotty!” he is crying, and Scott is waving his hand and walking away with other boys in a different direction from him, and

returning, "So long, Watsonio!"

Bob is walking up School Street to where it joins Oxford Street, in which the Claverley steam tram runs.

The square stone slabs of the pavement; the bright hot sunshine; the line of houses at his left, with the brass plates of doctors' consulting rooms and surgeries; the people walking past; the carriages and carts and hansom cabs passing along the street, and the clop-clop of the horses' hoofs on the wood blocks of the street surface; the green aspect of the park on the opposite side of the street, with its lawns and seats and trees.

As he is progressing towards Oxford Street, he is conscious of the smarting pain in his knee and of the fact that there is a tear in his trouser leg and of its having been sewn up by the wife of the school sergeant. His former feeling of superiority and of being grown up has evaporated, and his general sense of himself is of being an inferior little school boy who has fallen into the disgrace of spoiling his new suit. But while these things are in the back of his mind, another subject is occupying his mind in words:

. . . "Bet a chap could do anything he liked with them," he is remembering Ferriss having said. Those tarts. "Hot as mustard." "Dashed nice looking." Mindon. Says he can get hold of tarts better than those ones any time he likes. Fancy seven and six a chap has to pay for the baby. It'd be no use a chap taking a risk with one of those tarts unless he had some money. Seven and six a week. Scott. "There needn't be a baby." It's a pity a chap couldn't be sure there wouldn't be a baby. If a fellow didn't have any money, they'd come to his father for it, I suppose. Dad'd kick up an awful shindy. Mum'd go crook. But Ferriss said, too, "There needn't be a kid if you're careful." If a chap could be really sure there wouldn't be a kid——. I'd like to go with one of those tarts some time. Aw, I don't know. If dad *found out*——. But they needn't really know. Wish I could just meet one of those tarts. Have a yarn with one of them. "Hot stuff." I'd like to. Wish I could. Mindon's been with tarts, right enough. Anybody could tell that. It's all right if you're careful. I *wouldn't* want there to be a baby. That'd be awful. You can do something, I think, though. Something. Oh—I don't know, I don't know. Shut up about these tarts. What did Mindon say? "Wouldn't touch either of them with a forty-foot pole." Oh, those tarts are no good to me. I wouldn't go with one of them. "Dashed nice looking." Oh, shut up, shut up. "There needn't be a baby." They'd let a chap do anything he liked with them. Oh, shut up, I tell you. Like to have hold of one of them for a while. No, no, no. I wouldn't. Be jolly nice. So long as nobody found out at home. Oh no, no. Shut up about all this. Doesn't appeal to me really. Just once, to see what it was like. No, shut up. Could get Mindon to

introduce you to some of the tarts he knows. Oh, I wouldn't want *him* to know. He'd introduce you. "Dashed nice looking." Well, if he wouldn't tell any of the chaps at school——. Oh, that kind of thing's no good. Shut up. Go with one of those tarts. Lovely. Wish I could. No, no—I don't. What's this tram. A Claverley? No, it isn't. What do they mean about getting disease from going with a girl? How can you get diseased through it? That'd be rotten. Disease. Dirty kind of thing. Be diseased. If there wasn't the risk of that——. Gee, if a chap could have one of those tarts undressed for a bit——. Oh, shut up, *shut* up. Don't be such a damn' fool. What's this tram? Only a Standlick. No good. I feel rotten. Tear in my trousers. Mum. "You'll have to go back to your knicker-bockers." Don't want to go back to those things. One of those tarts undressed. Just for a while. Shut up, you damn' fool. Get diseased. What'd be the good of that? "Break out in big sores all over you." What's *this* tram? A Claverley . . .

The little engine and the two cars of the tram jerking to a standstill alongside him. His wincing as he is bending his knee in stepping into a compartment. The long wooden seats on either side of the compartment, vacant except for a young girl in one of the far corners. Her blue dress, her long stockinged legs, her wide-brimmed straw hat with the school badge band round the crown of it. Her dark hair twisted into a plait visible at the back of her hat and disappearing between her back and the back of the seat. Her big brown eyes, her full, deep red lips.

. . . Nona—Nona Richfield, his mind is saying. Going home from her school. My trousers . . .

Instinctively he is about to step down from the compartment again. But now her face is turned towards him, her eyes are flashing up at him, and she is smiling.

"Hullo, Nona," he is smiling in return and feeling embarrassed and acutely conscious of the repair in his trousers.

"Hullo, Bob!" Nona is saying.

He is sitting opposite to her as the tram with a shriek of its whistle is jerking and panting along Oxford Street again. They are not speaking for several moments while Bob's heart is beating harder and harder as he is trying to think of something to say and being harassed in his attempt by his fear that she will see the rent in his trousers. Her presence is aggravating the flow through his mind of such words as:

. . . "Could do anything he liked with them." "Hot as mustard." Shut up, shut up. Undressed. If I could go with one of those tarts——. Girls. . . .

His heart is thumping as he is asking at length, "Just going home from school?" and smiling in a grown-up, manly way.

Nona is nodding and smiling and saying, "Yes."

Another silence is growing more and more lengthy as he is groping for something else to remark, and his mind is going on:

. . . Have one of those tarts for a bit. Baby. Needn't be a baby. "Anything he liked with them." Oh, be quiet. . . .

"Your sister Elsie was at our place the other night," he is managing to observe after a while.

Nona has been looking out through the open doorway of the compartment. Now she is looking to him and smiling and replying, "Yes—I know."

Nona's concise answers to his attempted conversation is making him feel increasingly awkward, and his efforts to find something more to remark are now baulked by a persistent imagination in his brain of Nona naked. The more awkward he is feeling in her presence and the longer he is in thinking of something else to say, the more he is obsessed by this imaginative nude body. He is feeling himself an uncouth fellow as he is looking into her face to declare desperately:

"Judith's getting married soon—did you know?"

"Yes, Elsie told us."

"Next month—it's going to be."

"Yes, Elsie told us."

"Yes."

. . . Nona would be willing, his thoughts are assuring him. Oh, shut up. She'd like to. Oh, go away. "Anything he liked with them." Just to see what it was like. No, no, no. . . .

"Dad's still in hospital," he is beginning afresh.

"Yes, we heard that," Nona is returning.

. . . Wonder how dad *is*? his mind is pursuing. Diabetes. "The Firs." See Nona undressed. Be quiet, you silly fool. Nona. Nona. "Would you, Nona?" Get away. She's not that kind of girl. Yes, she'd be willing. No, of course, not . . .

"It's diabetes that dad has," he is saying now.

"Is it?"

"He's been in hospital for nearly a fortnight."

"Has he?"

"It's the second time he's been in hospital in the last three months."

"Yes—I know."

. . . Nona undressed. Oh, do shut up, his mind is going on to say. Ask her to meet you somewhere. Better than asking Mindon to introduce you to some tart. Go away, go away. "I say, Nona——." "No, I'm not going to. Nona——" *Shut up*. Naked. I don't want *any* girl. Disease. Of course. . . .

"Elsie told us you were going up for your music exam.," he is observing.

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Next week.”

“Nervous?”

Nona is giggling to herself and looking out through the window.

. . . She's a pretty little girl, his mind is saying. “Girls are just as curious.” “Nona——” *Do* be quiet. Hurry and speak to her. She'll be getting out of the tram at Bagley Junction. Chance will be gone for ever then. “Nona——” Wish I could be sure. What if she told mum? If Mindon was right——. “Just as curious.” A few more steps and it'll be Bagley Junction. “Nona—I say——” Can't say anything in the tram really. Oh, do shut up about all this. . . .

“Are you really nervous about the exam.?” he is repeating.

“Yes—*awfully!*”

“This isn't your first exam., though, is it?”

“Oh, no!”

His heart is beating hard and his lips are feeling dry as the tram is nearing Bagley Junction. He cannot think of any further remark to make to Nona.

Now the tram is jerking to a standstill at Bagley Junction. Nona is getting up and saying, “Good-bye, Bob.”

“I'm—I—I'm getting out here, too.”

He is stepping down out of the compartment and stretching out a hand to help Nona to alight.

“Got a message,” he is lying, and smiling at Nona as they are walking past the shops of Bagley Junction.

Nona is making no reply, and he is filled with a sense of baseness which he is trying to ignore.

“You going straight home, Nona?” he is managing to ask her as they have got beyond the shops and are passing private houses.

“Mmmmm!” Nona is replying. “There's nobody at home. I have to get the tea ready.”

. . . Go on, his mind is saying. What Mindon said. “Girls are just as curious.” Go on. Mindon would. “Nona——” Shut up, and give me time. I'll say something when we're at her gate. You can't talk much here in the street. “I say, Nona——” Not yet. Shut up. . . .

“Your mother's out, I suppose, is she?” he is inquiring in a casual tone.

“She went to town.”

“When will she be back?”

“She didn't say.”

“In time for tea, I suppose.”

“Yes.”

“Elsie's out, too, is she?”

“She's staying at a friend's place.”

His heart is thumping with excitement as he can see the tall grey walls of Nona's house and the iron railings enclosing the narrow front garden.

. . . Wait till we're at the gate, are the words in his mind. “Nona——” Be quiet now. “I say, Nona——” . . .

He is stepping forward to open the gate for her, but she is putting her hand on the catch before him. She is standing with one foot on the stone step at the gateway, and is turning to him.

“You're going on somewhere now, are you?” she is saying. “I'll have to run in.”

“I was going to say, Nona——”

“I'll have to leave you now.”

“Nona, I was just wondering——”

“Oh, how did you get that big tear in your trousers?” Nona is asking, her eyes directed to his trousered knees.

He is red in his face and is trying to smile.

“That's—nothing——” he is mumbling, and half chuckling as he is looking down at the sewn rent in the serge.

“Did you fall down? You *are* a naughty boy! Your mother will be wild with you!”

“I couldn't help it. I was running. We were playing prisoners' base. I was running. There was a chap after me. I fell down the steps. I didn't want to play. I couldn't help it.”

“It's a new suit, too. You're going to catch it when you get home. I wouldn't like to be you when your mother sees you.”

“Oh, that's nothing——”

“You'd better hurry off home and change your things before your mother sees you.”

“Huh! Not frightened about that——”

“Well, I really must go now. Good-bye.”

She is squeaking open the iron gate.

“Good-bye!” she is saying again, shutting the gate behind her, and walking up the garden path to the house.

“Good-bye!” he is returning, and swallowing his medley of inexpressible feelings, he is striding along the pavement. He is aware that he is panting as he walks and that his cheeks are burning hot.

. . . Oh, you fool, you fool! the words persist in his mind. Just a fool. Made me feel like a little kid. She's only fourteen herself. I'll bet you she's hot stuff, is that Nona. Telling me there was no one else in the house. Huh! I could have done anything I liked with her—if I wanted to. All this is no

good to me, though. *I* don't want her. She's only a little kid. All this kind of thing's no good to me anyway. Gets you nowhere. I have no time for girls. Mindon can run after tarts if he wants to. They don't interest me. All Nona can say is "Yes" or "No" or "Is it?" Is it? Is it? Got nothing to say. I wouldn't have her at any price. I'm not interested in girls at all. Fooling around with girls—it's no good. Messing about, running after them. A chap's a fool to bother with them. The whole thing makes you feel beastly. Rotten. . . .

V. Dad

He is walking along Lackard Street, Claverley, past the familiar window arrayed with writing pens, envelopes, pens, pencils, erasers, slates, books, purses, inkbottles, past the painted sign at the top of the window, "C. S. Watson, *The Printer and Stationer*," and in through the open doorway at the window's side.

. . . "Can't I have another pair of long trousers?" his mind is imagining. "Can't I, mum, please?" The shop. Don't want to be just in the shop. "I couldn't help it, mum." Down those steps. Can't just let the other chaps catch you. Got to run. Mum? About going into the shop? But when I—when I don't want ever to own the old shop——? . . .

Judith behind the counter as he is walking across the shop floor.

"Hullo!" he is saying casually.

"Bob!"

. . . What's she want? his mind is saying. . . .

He is continuing to walk towards the office at the back of the shop.

"*Bob!*"

"I'm in a hurry."

"But I want you. Come here."

"Got no time now to do anything for you. Get somebody else."

"Don't be silly. Come here."

"Oh, be bothered. Get the errand boy to do it."

"But it's something I want to tell you."

He is about to walk into the office, but Judith's unusually quiet tone of voice is making him pause. She is walking towards him, and he is turning and looking up into her dark brown eyes.

"What is it?" he is asking.

He is noticing that her face is serious and her thin lips drawn together tightly. She is putting a hand on his arm.

"You know father was very ill in hospital, don't you?"

"Er?"

“He died this morning.”

“Oh, don't be silly.”

And he is walking into the office. She is walking after him and taking hold of his arm again.

“I'm not being silly,” she is saying now. “He died just before twelve o'clock.”

He is standing still and noticing the covered file on the white-washed brick wall, with a label on it inscribed, “Receipts.” His heart is beginning to thump, he is wrinkling his brows, and the corners of his mouth are drooping. The only words in his mind are:

. . . Receipts. All the dust on that wall. Died. Receipts. . . .

“I don't believe it,” he is mumbling.

He is feeling a sickliness in himself, and a restlessness. He is working his arm free from Judith's clasp of it, walking sullenly up the worn wooden steps out of the office, and through the door into the house.

Into the dim, linoleum-covered passage. He is standing there with his straw hat still on his head.

. . . Mum. Where is she? are the words in his mind. Don't know what to do. Died. “Just before twelve o'clock.” Died. Mum. What had I better do? Where's mum? Sitting-room? Bedroom? Don't know what to do. My room. Go to my room. . . .

He is walking quietly along the hall and round up the stairs. He is feeling a dreadful heaviness on him as he is treading up the stairs.

. . . Died, his mind is going on. Dad. Dead. “Just before twelve.” “I don't believe it.” Dead. For God's sake——. Oh, God. Oh, God. Dead. Your father taken from you. Dad. . . .

On to the landing. He is gritting his teeth as he is hurriedly thrusting open his bedroom door and walking inside. In the bedroom, he is shutting the door behind him, then walking across the floor to the dressing table. The mirror. The reflection of his drawn, worried face and the straw hat with the school badge round it on his head. He is lifting off his hat and whirling it on to the bed. In the mirror he is looking at his face again.

. . . Dad. He's dead, are the words in his mind. I'm left without a father. I've only one parent now. Dad's been taken from me. Oh, God. Oh, God. Dead. . . .

Now he is inhaling a deep breath and beginning to walk hurriedly up and down the bedroom floor. He is pursing his lips angrily and shaking his fist at the wall.

. . . God, God, he is thinking. Oh, you——you——! Oh, God. My own father. Oh, God. You—God. For doing this to me——! I haven't a father now. “Poor fatherless boy!” “Oh, you poor dear child!” Brutal way to treat

me. Oh, whatever shall I do? Dad is dead. Died. Oh, for God's sake, what's the good of it? What's the use of this? God. You *God*—what does it mean? What can I do now? No father. Oh, you—you God—for doing this—taking away my father. Dear old dad. Gone. No sense in it. Horrible God. Oh, poor old dad. Poor, poor old dad. He's died. Poor old dad. Oh, dad . . .

Tears are running down his red cheeks, and there is a throbbing in his head. His fists are clenched tight, and his body strained and tense.

. . . Oh, what can I do? his mind is going on . . .

And he is thrusting his arm up across his eyes, then letting it fall hopelessly to his side again.

. . . No sense. Means nothing, his mind is saying. Damned silly business. It's such damned nonsense. Just mad. What do you want to take away my father for? Unfair. Oh, poor, poor old mum. Whatever can she be like? Dear, darling old mum. You poor old mum. Crying like anything. Oh, God. Cruel. Barbarous. Oh, so fiendish. God. Poor mum. Where, I wonder? In her bedroom. Downstairs, most likely. See her. Dry my eyes first. This damned crying. “You poor, unfortunate boy!” “You're so young, too.” “So young to have lost your father.” It doesn't matter, I tell you. I'm all right. Mum. . . .

He is standing in the middle of the floor, sniffing, and drying his raw, red shining eyes with his handkerchief. There is a feeling in him of impotency, and a vague wondering why he has not wept more than he has done.

He is leaving his room and descending the stairs. His heart feels full and heavy. He is conscious that his countenance looks sad.

. . . The shop? he is thinking. What will be done? You'll have to leave school. H'mmmmm, Don't know. Home from school to-morrow. Can't go back till after the funeral. If I have to go to work, have to have new long trousers. . . .

Across the hall, he is quietly pushing open the door of the sitting-room, and with a feeling that it would be wicked of him to make an unnecessary sound, he is walking inside. Mum with her back to him as she is seated before the escritoire, writing, her left hand holding a handkerchief which she is raising to her face. He is feeling strong love for her, and is walking across the carpeted floor and pausing with a hand on her shoulder.

“Mum,” he is saying.

She is starting and turning quickly.

“Oh, you gave me such a fright!” she is exclaiming.

He is bending and kissing her on her flushed and dampened cheek.

“My darling boy!” she is crying softly, and he can see tears growing in her eyes afresh as she is standing up, putting her arms round him and

kissing him again and again. “My darling boy! My own darling boy!” she is repeating; while he is kissing her in return, swallowing in his throat, and trying to think of something to say in comfort. For quite a minute she is clinging to him, and he can hear her sobbing.

. . . Poor mum, he is thinking. God—so cruel to her. Crying like this. Oh, it's dreadful. Devilish. Wonder what I can do for her. Crying like this. It's awful. Shop? Judith's looking after the shop. Quite all right. But what's going to be done? Poor mum. Me in the shop? No. Oh, no. “*Have to go into the shop.*” No. But I'll do something. I can work. Business. City. I'll work like anything for her. Not afraid. You see. . . .

Mum is looking into his face and blinking her wet eyes. He is aware that his own eyes are wet again. Mum is kissing him once more, and now leading him to the couch, and they are sitting down on it.

“Oh, your father was such a good man!” mum is declaring.

“Yes, I know,” he is mumbling, looking at the carpet.

“We were such a loving couple. We were always *just* like lovers, you know, Bob. We never tired of loving. He was such a dear good man. I don't know how I can live without him. I relied on him so much. I never did anything without first asking your poor father about it, Bob. I never made any decision by myself. It was always what he said. And what he said was always best.”

Bob is nodding his head with mournful seriousness. His arm is round mum's shoulder, and he is holding her tight. He is feeling grown up. His eyes are on the tear in his trousers, but there is no feeling of fear in him of what she will say when she notices it. The occasion of the tear seems part of a remote past.

“You know, Bob,” mum is going on, “you'll have to be the man of the family now.”

“Of course,” he is muttering, and half smiling.

“You'll have to let me lean on you, dear.”

“Yes—of course.”

“I must have someone. I can't get on by myself.”

“I'll look after you, mum darling.”

“You'll never go off and leave your old mum to look after herself?”

“Of course not.”

“You dear boy.”

He is drawing her closer to him. They are silent for a while, and he is thinking:

. . . Never leave her. Go out and do something. Earn plenty of money. Get a job somewhere. Best thing. Don't think I'll carry on the shop. Do something better than that. Ambition. I'll do something. Just in a shop—no

good to me. I'll look after mum. Work for her. Won't do that homework tonight. . . .

"Oh, I feel so helpless now that Cecil's gone!" mum is exclaiming. "I'll never be able to get on without him."

"Yes, you will, mum darling."

"I'm really such a helpless woman, Bob. You don't know your mother."

"It's all right, mum."

"Your father used to say to me, dear, 'You haven't enough confidence in yourself,' and he was right. As he always was. Don't ever leave me, Bob. Please don't ever do that."

"Of course I shan't, mum."

. . . Dad. Twelve o'clock he died. All the time I was playing prisoners' base he was dead. Mindon—Ferriss—"Hot as mustard"—"Don't let Watson go! There he is! He's getting over the wall! Stop him! Stop him!" And all the time dad was lying—dead. . . .

VI. The Quiet Boy

In the sitting-room after tea, in the quickly fading light of the summer day, he is sitting on a chair beside the window.

Mum sitting forward in the arm-chair by the empty fireplace and looking at its bare blackleaded bars. The ample form of Aunt Doris in the armchair opposite her. Judith on the Chesterfield, knitting.

"What do you think you'll do, Ellen?" Aunt Doris is asking mum.

"I can't think *what* we can do," mum is saying despairingly. "The whole place is just an incubus now."

"It's such a pity that Bob isn't older."

"Oh, he's not a bit interested in the shop, anyhow," Judith is putting in, and Bob is feeling somehow a wicked boy for being so disinterested.

"Wouldn't it be best to sell the place?" Aunt Doris is suggesting. "It ought to fetch a fair price."

"I can't bear to think about it at all," mum is declaring. "It just frightens me. I mustn't think about it."

"Of course, something will have to be done, dear," Aunt Doris is saying. "I expect you'll have to sell it. And take a small house somewhere."

"I'm sure that will be best," Judith is agreeing. "Just a small house. There'll be only mother and Bob, you see."

"Of course."

"Somewhere right away from here, I should think," Aunt Doris is saying. "I should say, somewhere on the other side of the harbour."

"Yes," Bob is brightening up to concur. "On the North Shore

somewhere.” And he is picturing a new house in new surroundings—a fresh beginning. The prospect of it is making him feel happy, a happiness mingled with a subconscious reminder that at this time he ought not to be feeling happy.

“It's all very well to talk,” mum is saying; “but I'm sure I couldn't just do what you say. I haven't the slightest idea what to do to sell the place. And it makes me terrified to think about it—what it would mean. I couldn't possibly do it myself. I'd be quite helpless in it. Oh, I don't know what I shall do.”

“Yes, you do,” Aunt Doris is countering: “you'll be brave, and you'll go through with it all. That's what you'll do. That's what you must do, Ellen.”

“If I wasn't so dreadfully afraid, Doris dear.”

“What is there to be afraid of, Ellen?”

“Oh, what isn't there to be afraid of? It's all so terrifying—now I haven't got Cecil.”

“I think Cecil spoiled you. He took all the responsibility—did all the thinking.”

“Yes, he did.”

“And that was the worst thing for you, seeing what you were.”

“I suppose it was. I shall miss him terribly.”

“How about your wedding, Judith? Will you postpone it now?”

“I don't know. I suppose we ought to, Auntie,” Judith is shrugging her shoulders and sighing. “It *does* seem silly, though, doesn't it?”

“To put off your wedding, Judith?” mum is demanding.

“Well, of course, people would think the most awful things if we didn't put it off. Otherwise I see no reason why we should.”

“But—my dear child!—”

“I'm sure if I was dead I wouldn't want anybody to make a lot of fuss about it,” Judith is saying, her head bent over her work.

“You're very practical in your ideas, Judith, I must say,” from Aunt Doris.

“I believe in being practical and sensible and business-like about everything, Auntie. What's the use of just *drifting* through life?”

“Well, that's very sensible, of course.”

“I don't see why one's home, for instance, shouldn't be run in a business-like way. Running a house *is* a business.”

“You're quite right, Judith. And I hope you'll be able to run your home on business lines. Still—still—wait until you have half a dozen small children tearing your things to pieces——”

“But I'm not going to have a big family.”

“Oh?”

“No, I am not, Auntie.” And Bob's eyes are fixed on Judith very intently as she says it.

“Well, I'm glad to hear that, Judith dear,” Aunt Doris is nodding her head, and Bob's eyes are momentarily turned to her.

“Harold and I have talked it all over,” Judith is going on to say. “What we'd like most, of course, is a boy and a girl. And we'd stop at that. But if the first two children are either girls or boys, I think we should like to have one more just in case the third child turned out to be a brother to the girls or a sister to the boys.”

“You don't propose to have more than three children, in any case?” Aunt Doris is asking.

“Goodness, no!”

“And how are you going to make sure of that?” Aunt Doris is smiling broadly as she is putting this question. Bob is turning to Judith all alert for her answer.

“Well, Auntie, I have no scruples about using contraceptives.”

“Haven't you, dear?”

“I think it's scandalous not to. I think we've no right to go on bearing children year after year unless we've got tons of money to support them.”

“That's quite right, Judith. I don't think any woman should be called upon to wear herself out and drag herself down with baby after baby year in and year out for the best period of her life. And you can't expect men to be totally abstemious.”

“Mother tells me that. Though I'm sure Harold isn't a passionate man.”

“Well—as for that—h'm—well, you're not married to him yet, my dear. . . . What's that, Ellen?” She is turning to mum. “Oh—oh yes. Bob—yes, Bob—you're very quiet, Bob,” Aunt Doris is smiling round at him.

He is smiling back at her.

“He's a very quiet boy,” mum is commenting.

“Poor Bob!” Aunt Doris is saying. “He's had a dreadful day to-day, losing his father. No wonder he's quiet. Do you feel it very much, Bob? I suppose you do.”

“Of course—Auntie,” he is mumbling.

“It's a dreadful thing for us to lose one of our parents when we're young. It's a terrible blow. But you must buck up, you know, Bob. You're the man of the house now. You'll have to get busy and do something to help your mother. You'll have to be a big man. I see you've got into long trousers. That's a good beginning. You must work hard and get on, and earn plenty of money. Eh?”

He is nodding his head and saying, “Oh, yes—I know.”

But in his mind the words recur:

. . . “Can't expect men to be totally abstemious.” “Contraceptives.”
“Baby after baby.” “Harold isn't a passionate man.” . . .

VII. Girls

Two hours later he is in bed; and he is thinking before sleep steals over him:

. . . Well, that settles it. Fancy Judith and Aunt Doris talking like that. I'm not going to have anything to do with girls after this. They're no good to me. All that kind of thing's not what I want. I want something better than all this talk, and all these rotten feelings. Made a fool of myself with Nona, too, running after her—when I don't want her, really. It's just all these feelings. They lead you to make a fool of yourself. I don't want them at all. Dear old mum—darling old thing—I'm going to stick to her. I'll work like anything for her. Earn any amount of money. I'll look after her and protect her and make her happy. She'll never want for anything. Darling old mum. She's so afraid of everything. I'm not the slightest bit afraid. I don't care what happens. I shan't be afraid. Mum needs somebody to look after her. I'm going to get on in life—rise to a big position—earn more and more money. I don't care how hard I have to work. I'm determined to make a name for myself. And everything I get will be for mum. We'll sell this old house and the shop and everything. I said I wouldn't go into the shop, and you see I'm not going to. When I say a thing I mean it. Don't worry about that. A pretty smart young man. Now what we're going to do—we're going to have a nice house on the North Shore. Then I'm going to think of nothing else but earning money and getting on. I'm not going to let any thought of girls or sex or anything come in my way. I'm through with all that beastliness. Gets you no-where. . . .

He is turning over restlessly between the sheets.

. . . Oh, I feel that rotten about everything, his mind is going on. Poor old dad. And I can't get over Judith and Auntie talking like that. Talking quite openly. It was awful. I never imagined girls or women talked like that. Eye-opener to me. Gee, they're hot. It's extraordinary. Got the shock of my life. Thought it was only boys who thought about these things. By gee, I've been a mug. . . .

He is feeling as if a light has burst on his mind. But it is not a light that is making him happy: it is making him lose a shadow that has for years been part of himself, an illusion that all girls are negative and innocent of thoughts about the forces of physical creation.

Chapter Three: The Young Man's Day

I. Writing on the Wall

Six years later, on a morning in the autumn of 1907, he is sitting, clad in his dressing gown, at the table in his bedroom in the new house on the North Shore.

Through the lace curtained window at his side he is looking across slate roofs at the distant ferries steaming to and fro between their Circular Quay jetties and different bays and coves along Sydney Harbour. He is blinking his eyelids and feeling that they are heavy. He is yawning and turning away from the scene through the window, so that he is aware of the paper tacked to the white plastered wall in front of him, on which are big letters inscribed in his own hand:

. . . Stick To It (he is casually reading from the paper). Present Work and Future SUCCESS: Or Present Laziness and Future Mediocrity? Which Do You Prefer? CHOOSE! Hurry and Decide! Which is it Going To Be? Which, Now? Which? . . . Ah, dear! he is going on to think. Getting late, I expect. I think I know this lesson, though. What's the other stuff? . . .

He is closing the typescript folio on the table in front of him, and on the cover of which appear the words, "Part Seven of the Complete Course in Salesmanship and Business Efficiency." Now he is taking from the far side of the table a small book titled, "Helps to Real Success in Life: Concentration."

. . . H'm, his mind is proceeding, as he is turning over the pages. Here we are. To-day's Exercise. What is it? Read over several passages from a book you are interested in, and give as complete a summary as you can in your mind of the passages read. Glory! What book have I been reading lately? Oh, I can't think. I'm too sleepy this morning. Didn't sleep enough last night. Thinking of being given this new job. I think I'll leave this concentration lesson this morning. Too tired. . . .

He is stretching his arms to their full extent, yawning again, and turning half round in his chair to get up. But he is conscious now of the writing on the paper tacked to the wall beside his bed.

. . . Keep On—Keep On! (he is reading). Backbone Is What You Need! Keep On Going!! . . . Oh, I'd better do this stuff, he is thinking now. No good giving in too easily. The salesmanship stuff. Concentrate on that. Let me see, now. What was that lesson about? The approach to the client. It is necessary to consider carefully the character of your prospective client. H'm. Any little weaknesses he may have. You should bear in mind your

client's character and general position when constructing your selling points. For instance, he may be known to have views in favour of improved labour conditions, in which case you will naturally bring to his notice any particularly favourable conditions enjoyed by the workers employed in the making of the article you wish to sell. On the other hand, you will naturally refrain from mentioning any such particulars to a client with reactionary views in this respect. Be ready to please your client at every angle. If he wants a cheap article, you must argue him round to see that yours is the cheapest on the market, from the point of view of value if not from that of price. If he wants quality, you must be able to convince him that no article of its kind is of better quality than yours. Your article must be "all things to all men." An efficient salesman will have a ready answer to every possible objection. That's about all there was in it. Now I must get dressed. I'm not going to do any physical exercises this morning. Too tired. . . .

He has closed the book on concentration and is standing and removing his dressing gown, when his eyes are attracted by the writing on the paper tacked to the wall beside the washstand.

. . . Be determined! (he is reading). Don't Give in Because You're Tired. Go through with ALL Your Plans to the Bitter End. It Is Determination that Will Win!! . . . Oh, Lord, he is going on to think. I really must keep fit, I suppose. . . .

For five minutes more he is engaged in contortions and gyrations on his back on the thin carpet of the bedroom floor, and swingings and extensions of his limbs while standing up.

Now he is running into the bathroom, quickly bathing, and returning and quickly getting dressed.

II. Anticipations

Out of his bedroom, along the passage, through the breakfast room, and into the kitchen. Mother sitting beside the gas stove, drawing out the griller covered with steaming bread, then pushing it under the toasting irons again.

"Good morning, ma!" he is saying as he is walking across the brown-linoleumed floor to her side, and bending down and kissing her cheek.

"Good morning. Are you early or am I late?"

"Yes. No. I don't know. You are or am I. Anyway I don't want to be late this morning."

"I'll not be long, sonny."

He is whistling an improvized tune and walking round the kitchen floor, his hands in his trousers pockets, but the words in his mind are:

. . . My breakfast should have been ready by now. Hurry up now, ma. She never has my breakfast ready the moment I want it . . .

“Do you think you'll hear anything about your new position, to-day, Bob?” mother is asking without removing her eyes from the stove.

“I'm hoping to. Old Gordling just has to make up his mind.”

“Whom do you call old Gordling?”

“Oh, I told you before who Mr. Gordling was.”

“He's the manager of the company, is he?”

“Oh no, no, no!”

“Who is he, then?”

“He's the—m-a-n-a-g-i-n-g—d-i-r-e-c-t-o-r. You never remember what I tell you.”

“Yes, I do remember now. Well, who's the manager?”

“The manager is—*Mr. Tanson.*”

“Oh—of course.”

“I told you before that it's Mr. Gordling, the managing director of the Patent Fence Company, who has come over from Melbourne to investigate the Sydney office. Mr. Tanson is the manager of the Sydney office.”

“And it's Mr. Tanson who thinks so much of you?”

“Tanson would trust me with anything.”

“Do you think he knows you're only twenty-one?”

“I'm hanged if I know. I don't think he worries how old a chap is. All he wants to know is can you do the work? If you can do the work you get the job with Tanson. There's tons more scope with this firm than there is with these grandmotherly old places. If I'd stayed on as clerk in the insurance company where I began, I'd have been just in the same position until I was over thirty. Here I'll be the manager of a branch before many years.”

“I'd feel more contented about you, Bob, if there weren't so many changes always going on in this Patent Fence Company. In the insurance company you were absolutely safe.”

“Well, aren't I safe with the Patent Fence Company?”

“Always revising their staff—I keep on wondering when will they get rid of *you?*”

“That's nonsense, ma. You don't understand. You can't possibly understand it all. Listen to me. What has happened is this: The thing is that the Patent Fence Company has grown so fast. It didn't exist a couple of years ago. And now it's got branches all over Australia. It's extraordinary the way it's gone on. It's a wonderful thing, this patent fence. You ask anyone. Miles of it are being bought. We've got orders coming in from everywhere.”

“I think the company's grown a bit too fast, Bob.”

"It hasn't anything of the kind. Listen and I'll tell you. Since Mr. Tanson took charge in Sydney three months ago there's been an enormous increase in business. Mr. Tanson's only a young fellow—not more than thirty. But he's the smartest business man—he's made a huge difference to the office staff. There were only about six people in the whole office before he came: now there are seventeen! He's been talking about shifting us all into new premises. Mr. Tanson's all alive. He's full of ideas. The firm owes an awful lot to Mr. Tanson."

"And what has Mr. Gordling come over for from Melbourne?"

"He's from the head office, don't you see? Well, the thing is that at the head office they think our staff's too big. But you see, they don't understand that Mr. Tanson is going to keep on increasing the business so much that a big staff will be needed to deal with it. They don't realize that. So some of the staff is going to be sacked. Nobody knows yet who will have to go."

"And are you sure, dear, that they'll keep you on?"

"My dear ma—Mr. Tanson has *told* me that my position is all right. He told me himself that there was going to be a little reorganizing of the staff, and that he wanted to have a smaller country sales department, and put me in charge of it."

"He must have a very high opinion of you, dear."

"He has, mother. It's just a matter of waiting until Mr. Gordling confirms my appointment, and I'll have that job."

"In charge of the country sales department?"

"*Yes*. I've practically got the job, you see. I'm as good as in charge of the country sales now!" And he is striking the kitchen table with his fist several times in emphasis.

"Well, I only hope that Mr. Gordling will confirm the appointment."

"He can't fail to. Mr. Tanson told me that Mr. Gordling thinks an awful lot of him and will do whatever he advises. Everybody knows what a smart man Mr. Tanson is."

"He must have a very big salary."

"No, he hasn't. That's what he complains about. He told me that if they didn't give him another five hundred a year, he wasn't going to stay. Half a dozen firms, he says, have offered him posts at a thousand a year. Naturally, he's not going to stay where he is for less. Now if he *were* to leave—I'm not saying he's going to—but if he *were* to—do you know what I'd do?"

"No."

"Ha, ha, ha!" He is holding his head very high and looking up at the blue sky through the kitchen window. His hands are shoved tight down into his

trousers pockets, and his legs are stiff and his feet set wide apart. "Well, I'd ask Mr. Gordling for the job myself!" And he is smiling out at the sky and feeling very contented.

"Bob—you wouldn't have such a cheek, would you?"

"Why not?"

"Bob! Why—why not!"

"Look here!" And he is turning suddenly and pointing a forefinger at her. "I could manage that place. I could! I could! Of course, you say—Oh yes, I'm only twenty-one. But—well, you don't know me. Mr. Tanson says I'm the quickest young man he's ever met. There!"

"Do you think that Mr. Gordling would give you the position?"

"Well—I don't know. Mr. Gordling is a different kind of man altogether from Mr. Tanson. Mr. Gordling is over fifty. But what I'd do—I'd make him a proposition. I'd offer to manage the Sydney branch at the salary I'm getting now, and if at the end of six months I hadn't increased the business, he could give me the sack. But if I did increase the business, then I'd continue the managership at seven hundred and fifty a year."

"You simply take my breath away, Bob."

"Oh, I haven't told you half. Do you know, I've got piles of ideas for getting more business—if they'd only let me try them out."

"I think you're wonderful."

"Oh, I'm not saying I'm going to get Tanson's job. All I'm saying is that if he left, I'd apply for it. And I wouldn't be surprised if I got it. I expect I could soon talk round old Gordling."

"He wouldn't like to hear you referring to him as 'old Gordling.'"

"Oh, Gordling's nobody. Mr. Tanson could run rings round old Gordling."

"Well, you'd better have your breakfast now, you amazing boy. The toast's all done. Carry it in, will you?—and I'll bring the sausages. They're in the oven." . . .

They are seated now at the table in the breakfast room, consuming fried sausages and bread and gravy.

"You're not forgetting we're going to Judith's to-night, are you?" mother is asking him after a while.

"Oh, glory, yes! It's Saturday, isn't it! I was nearly forgetting."

"This will be the sixth anniversary of their wedding, you know."

"Will it be only the sixth? I suppose it must be. They seem to have been married much longer than that."

"Well, they're very happy. Though I don't think Harold appreciates all that Judith does to keep the home nice. She puts no end of work into it. There's never a thing out of place. She's most efficient. She won't have a

thing only half done. Everything must be done thoroughly, or it won't suit Judith. Harold's very lucky to have her. It isn't every girl who will work so hard."

"Perhaps not."

"I often wonder what kind of girl you'll marry. Bob?"

"I'm always telling you, I'm not going to marry."

"Ah, you say so. But I wonder!"

"I tell you, I'm *never* going to be married. A chap's a fool to tie himself down to a wife and family. Girls don't interest me. I have no time for them. I think more about my career."

"Do you mean that you'd really be willing to go on living as we are—just the two of us?"

"Of course. I'm quite contented. Aren't you?"

"Yes, darling, I'm the happiest woman in the world, just going on like this with you. But there's always a horrible little thought at the back of my mind."

"What do you mean?"

"A horrible little thought that some day you're going to be married. And then all this will come to an end."

"Well, you can put that horrible little thought right out of your mind, you silly old ma. I haven't the faintest notion of getting married. I don't want girls at all. I want to get on."

"If I could be sure that you would really *never* marry——"

"Well, I can't tell you any more, can I?"

"You're all I live for, you know, Bob. There's nothing else in my life but you."

"How about Judith?"

"Oh, Judith's married and settled down and I don't think she wants me. All I live for is to see you get on. I just live for your success. So now you know."

"Well, all I'm going to live for is to make you happy. You won't want for anything."

Soon he has finished his breakfast, has folded his serviette, and is standing up, and now is bending over mother with his hands on her shoulders.

"You've got to understand that, ma, you know," he is saying. "I mean what I say. We're going to go on living together—for ever and ever."

He is pretending not to notice the tears in her eyes, as she is whispering, "You don't know what this means to me, Bob."

"Now you mustn't worry any more."

At which he is pressing her shoulders, kissing her all over her face for

half a minute, and now running into the hall.

Now he is running back to the breakfast room.

“Did I kiss you good-bye?” he is shouting. And he is kissing her again and again and again.

III. Suspense

He has disembarked from the North Shore ferry at Circular Quay, and is walking up the pavement of Pitt Street.

In his ears are the sounds of clattering trams banging along the rails in the street, the less clamorous noise of horses and carts, cabs, and motor-cars, and the shouted conversation of male pedestrians walking in twos and threes along the pavement to their offices.

As he is nearing the building in which is the suite of offices of the Patent Fence Company, he is feeling an increasing excitement, which he is trying to put away from him; and his mind is saying:

. . . Oh, shut up about getting Tanson's job. I wasn't thinking seriously about that at all. I'll be satisfied with being head of the country sales. I dare say I'll be the youngest country sales manager of any firm in Sydney. Of any firm in Australia, for that matter. In the whole world, as far as that goes. Oh, be quiet. “Dear Sir, We have heard of your extraordinary success as manager of the country sales department of the Patent Fence Company, and have pleasure in offering you the position of our firm's overseas department.” Don't be silly. I dare say I'll get a few offers from other firms, though, if I make a success here. I'd want at least five hundred a year before I'd leave. I'd leave for five hundred, I think. Well, I'd put it to Tanson that he could pay me five hundred and I'd stay—otherwise I'd leave. And commission, of course. No reason why I should make myself cheap just because I'm young. If I had five hundred a year, I'd start saving up to buy a small motor launch. We might have a house nearer the edge of the harbour and have our own boat shed. How would it be if I had Tanson's job and seven hundred and fifty a year? Huh! The first thing, I'm going to have a fresh lot of circulars. Plenty of illustrations. Have new ones drawn. And photographs. Photographs of fencing in position—in actual use. Testimonials, of course. Photographs of the writers of them. Every farmer in New South Wales will know about the patent fence. I'll have a training class for salesmen. Special night classes. Lantern slides, of course. Vigorous talks. I'll make them *get* the business. No wonder Tanson got rid of Peller—he was useless as head of the country sales, with *all* his big staff. Really, they haven't *begun* to sell patent fencing—compared with the way it could be sold. . . .

He is in sight of the stone building on the first-floor windows of which he can see in gold lettering, "The Patent Fence Company." As he is getting nearer and nearer to it and is at length mounting the stone steps, entering the tiled lobby, and walking up the wooden stairs, his heart is beating faster, and the words are coming into his mind:

. . . Shut up, now, about all this rot. I'm not manager of the country sales yet. The roof wouldn't fall in if I wasn't made head of them. I'm not saying that Gordling's bound to confirm the appointment. Time enough to crow when I've actually got the job. Oh, Tanson's job be hanged. I wouldn't ask Gordling for Tanson's job, really. I'll be doing pretty well if I get the country sales. No end of work. At it night and day. It'll be an enormous thing to tackle. I haven't had that much experience. Gordling. Mr. Gordling. Oh, dear. . . .

As he is walking into the general office and seeing his fellow clerks, Maindring, Epsart, and Boulter, he is feeling very young and very small. In the atmosphere of the office, the idea of his being at the head of an entire department is seeming like a preposterous fantasy. The notion of his issuing orders to fellows like Maindring, Epsart, and Boulter, for instance, all older than himself, is causing him to experience a feeling of chill. But he is countering the thought that they would laugh at him, by the words in his mind:

. . . Oh, I can do it right enough. You see. Needn't bring about many changes at first. Go easy for a bit until I feel my feet. Those new circulars. No. Not at once. Later. . . .

"Good morning, you chaps!" he is saying as he is lifting off his felt hat and reaching it on to one of the row of clothes pegs in the shadow of the telephone bureau. He is feeling that he wants to appear quite natural and good-natured despite his nearness to promotion.

"Morning, Watson!" the others are saying.

He is walking to where the three young men are grouped at the back of the long high desk at the rear of the office. The good-looking, broadly built and dilatory Maindring; the pale, unhealthy-looking, short Epsart; and the tall, dark moustached and richly voiced Boulter. The red leather-covered ledgers and the day-book, the ink and the pens, the wire baskets filled with papers on a brass-railed rack above the desk.

"Well—what's the latest?" Bob is asking and smiling as he looks at the three faces. He is wishing to appear ignorant of an imminent change that is to place him in a superior position. "Anything doing?"

"We don't know anything," Maindring is saying. "What do *you* know?"

"Less than nothing. Is Gordling in yet?"

"Yes," Boulter is answering. "He's in Tanson's office. He must have been

here all night, I think. I was here at half-past eight, and he was here then.”

“Tanson in, too?”

“Tanson came in ten minutes ago. They're both at it now.”

“Good luck to them!” from Maindring.

“Wish they'd make up their minds,” Epsart is saying. “Either let us stay or send us off. But don't keep us suspended in mid-air.”

“Makes you feel something like a hen with its neck on the block—waiting for the chopper,” Maindring is observing.

“Oh, you'll hear the worst to-day. Sure to,” Boulter is offering the opinion. “They won't keep us waiting over the week-end.”

Bob is saying after a while, “I've got work to do. I'd better get on with it.”

“Suppose I ought to do something, too,” Epsart is deciding.

“It's all right for you fellows,” Boulter is saying. “But I've got simply nothing at all *to* do. I'm just left.”

“Why—how do you mean?” Bob is asking.

“I can't do anything until there's someone else appointed to be head of the country sales. I've done everything that was outstanding when Peller left. But it's no use going on to anything more until you know what's to be done about this new job.”

“Oh, somebody will be appointed to that soon enough,” Bob is saying in an off-hand way. “I wouldn't worry about that.”

“There are a hundred and one things that *could* be done. But I'm not going to tackle them until the new man comes along.”

“You'll hear about the new man in due course, Boulter.”

“Why, do you know anything about it?”

“Of course I don't.”

“As a matter of fact, I've applied for the job myself!” Boulter is announcing, smiling.

Bob is trying to seem unperturbed at the information. He is also feeling sorry for Boulter that he should be so concerned about the new post.

“Do you think you have any chance?” he is asking him.

“As good a chance as anybody. I could do the work right enough.”

“Did you speak to Tanson about it?”

“No good speaking to him. I spoke to Gordling himself.”

“Did you? What's the matter with speaking to Tanson? He's the one who'll make the appointment. Gordling will only confirm what Tanson advises.”

“Well, you might think that. But between you and me, I wouldn't like to be Tanson.”

“Why?”

“Tanson's nearer the sack than any of us.”

“Don't be mad. Tanson's one of the smartest men in Sydney. Gordling thinks the sun shines out of him. Tanson practically told me so.”

“It'd be just like Tanson to tell you that. He's full of talk. But really he's made a mess of this place. And old Gordling knows it. He's here to clean up the mess. But he won't clean it up until he's got rid of Tanson.”

Bob is smiling and shaking his head; now he is walking away. He is feeling that it is not agreeable to continue this discussion. He is walking to the other side of the desk.

“Good morning!” he is saying pleasantly to Miss Johnson and Miss Apson, who are talking beside one of their typewriting tables, and to the elderly Mr. Petersong and the middle-aged Mr. Betts at either side of the table near the window.

He is sitting up on his stool at the desk, opening the drawer in front of him, and pulling from it several large sheets of paper pinned together and headed, “Factory Pay Sheet.” He is beginning to check the columns and calculations of time worked at so much an hour, and to acknowledge each correct total of wage with a tick in red ink. But in a little while the hum of talk from the groups of clerks and the typists is making him feel restless, and he is beginning to describe casual geometrical diagrams on his sheet of blotting paper.

. . . Can't work, he is deciding. Until I know definitely. Let Gordling say the word, and I'll begin. I'll get to work on those new circulars. Poor Boulter. He'll be one of those who has to leave. He hasn't a hope for the country sales job. Tanson wouldn't dream of giving it to him. He's half asleep. More likely to be able to manage the unbleached calico section of a drapery shop. Positive revelation to me that Boulter would have had the nerve to think he could take on the country sales. It's just conceit that made him apply to Gordling. To think of it! The conceited ass. To go right up to Gordling himself. I'd like to know what Gordling thought. And Tanson, too. Utter cheek. And like his impudence to talk about Tanson having to go. It's only because he knows Tanson doesn't think anything of him. Circulars. And there's no reason why there shouldn't be a school at night for salesmen. I could run it. . . .

Epsart is mounting the stool next to Bob's.

“Must try to do something,” he is observing, and opening the big ledger before him. The parchment-like odour from the leaves of the book is in Bob's nostrils. Now Epsart has found the place he wants, the rustle of the turning leaves has stopped, and Bob can hear instead scraps of conversation between Boulter and Maindring at the other side of the desk. Maindring is standing with his back to the desk, his elbows on the edge of it: Boulter is standing facing him with his hands in his trousers pockets.

“Awfully pretty, you know——”

“—I can quite imagine you would——”

“—I said to her—‘Yes,’ she said—so I said——”

“—And did she? ——”

“—You see, it was so obvious—so I—then she asked me——”

“—What did you say to that——?”

“—I said—what else could I say——?”

“—Do you think, though—what she meant——?”

“—It was this way, you see——”

“—Undressable, I mean——?”

“—If you were to——. Of course, what I think——”

“—Oh, I wasn't——”

“—The other night, and I was thinking to myself——”

“—Do you really think so? Mind you, when you come to think of it——”

“—Every one of them, I say.”

“—Of course, if you mean that——”

“—You know him, don't you? He was with me at the time. And he agreed with what I said.”

“It's hard to say.”

“Everyone of them, as they walked along the pavement, laughing and chatting to the fellows with them you'd think was pure. Yet we were both willing to bet that mighty few of them hadn't been touched.”

“It's been my experience that they're all willing.”

“I say a chap's a fool not to. Why shouldn't he?”

“Oh, certainly.”

. . . Always the same subject, Bob is thinking. Can't talk about anything else. Unless it's racehorses. For the love of heaven, shut up about it. Girls, girls. The only thing they think about. . . .

Epsart is leaning over his ledger, and with a broad smile on his face, is saying something to Maindring and Boulter. Scraps of his speech are coming to Bob's ears.

“Did you hear that story about the—and she went up to him and said—and he said—so she said—then after a while—and she said—and he said—rather good, wasn't it?”

The three of them are laughing; now Maindring is talking.

“Like the chap—one night—a woman—she asked him—so he said——”

And now it is Boulter's voice that Bob can hear.

“The other evening—in Castlereagh Street—this is absolutely true—a girl spoke to me—so I said—and she said ‘twenty-five shillings’—so I said—she laughed—I said—‘yes,’ she said, ‘but not for the—’ ha, ha, ha, ha!”

"I've known some girls—mind you—but if you—willing to take ten shillings."

"Oh, I'm not saying——"

"Yes, and—others—for nothing!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

. . . Twenty-five shillings—ten shillings, Bob's mind is echoing. Wouldn't it be worth it? Just for once? No, no, no. "I say a chap's a fool not to." "Oh, certainly." Ah no. Must think about work. This new job. A woman? No. . . .

Epsart is giving up his attempt to work, and is throwing his pen into the rack above the ledger.

"Nothing doing," he is saying, and sliding off his stool. "I'm going to stroll round to some of the other fellows and see if they know anything."

Ten minutes later he is walking back into the office carrying a paper in his hand. He is looking at the paper as he is approaching the desk, and smiling and making grimaces at it.

"What have you got?" Maindring is asking him as Epsart is walking to him. Epsart is laying the paper out on Maindring's desk and Boulter and Maindring are both poring over it.

"Jolly good," Maindring is saying. "Where did you get it?"

"I've just been in to the publicity room. None of them is doing anything there. They say they've got no work to go on with. They're just waiting. This is what Osden, the artist, was doing. Rich, isn't it? He says I can keep it."

"Show it to Watson."

"Want to see it?" Epsart is asking Bob.

"What is it?"

He is putting it on Bob's pay sheets, and Bob is seeing a coloured drawing in Osden's familiar style of the nude figure of a woman reclining on a couch.

"You mustn't want to keep it," Epsart is warning him.

Bob is smiling at the production, and now handing it back to its owner.

"Not bad," he is chuckling.

"Osden can do these jolly well, can't he? He was beginning on another one when I left him. He'll probably keep it for you if you go in and ask him."

"Oh, I'm not so particular."

"All right. . . . I suppose you've never been in Osden's flat, have you?"

"Can't say I have. Why?"

"He's got some little gems *there*. In every room he's got them. He's drawn them all himself. They're over every wall. Talk about hot! This one's

nothing to some of them.”

“He must have a powerful imagination to think of all the different faces.”

“Don't worry about that. He's drawn nearly every one of his pictures from women he's had at his flat.”

“Are you sure?”

“Go to Osden's flat one night. He'll introduce you.”

“Huh. I think I'll leave them alone.”

And Bob is turning back to his pay sheets, while Epsart is shrugging his shoulders, remounting his stool, and having another look at the coloured picture. Bob's mind is saying:

. . . It's either women or work. Can't go at both. Very tempting. But I'm going to buckle down to this new job. Going to work night and day at it. Going to get results. Show them what can be done. . . .

It is half an hour later that the door of Mr. Tanson's office is opening, and Bob is turning round on hearing Mr. Tanson's voice saying sharply, “I'll have my money first, though.”

He is seeing Mr. Tanson's back in the doorway: the light brown tweed suit, his felt hat in his hand; and the face of Mr. Gordling over his shoulder.

“I haven't time to go into that now,” Mr. Gordling is saying quietly, his face upraised. “You can come in about it next week.”

“Oh, that's not good enough,” from Mr. Tanson. “I want my money.”

“Well, you won't get a penny from me. You can sue the company for it. But you'd better clear out now.”

“All right—all right—all *right!* See about that. All right. See my solicitors. All right.”

Mr. Tanson's face is bright red as he is turning round to face the general office, and Mr. Gordling is shutting the managerial door.

“Good-bye, everybody!” Mr. Tanson is crying, and smiling broadly he is striding out past the desk, through the main door, and now his footsteps can be heard as he is hastening down the stairs.

IV. End of Suspense

Bob is feeling utterly bewildered, and his heart is all aflutter.

. . . Tanson! Tanson! Can't believe it, the words are coming into his mind. . . .

“That's number one!” Epsart is saying to Maindring and Boulter, and trying not to exhibit excitement in his voice.

“Short and dramatic!” Maindring is smiling. “Wonder who's next?”

“I told you this would happen,” Boulter is remarking.

“Do you think he's gone for good?” Bob cannot help asking, and is

ashamed at the trace of anxiety evident in his tone.

“You won't see him in here again, my lad,” Boulter is assuring him. “I saw this coming days ago. Tanson was making an unholy mess of this place.”

“Tanson's one of smartest men in Sydney.”

“My boy, that's just been the trouble. He's so smart that a few more months of him and the firm would have been bankrupt.”

“I never imagined it!” Bob is sighing and looking very worried.

. . . I should have asked Gordling for that new job, he is going on to think. Boulter's asked him. Damned nuisance. I ought to go and see Gordling now. Before he settles the appointment. Oh, lord. He mightn't be in the right mood now. Might be better to leave it until Monday. If it mightn't be too late then. Country sales. Head of the country sales. “Yes, sir, Mr. Tanson did tell me. I'll get on with the work right away.” Circulars. Won't worry about the salesmanship classes for a bit with old Gordling. Circulars. Illustrations. Photographs in them. “I've got plenty of ideas, sir. Oh, yes, sir.” . . .

The bell from Mr. Gordling's room is ringing in the office, and Billy, the office boy, is scraping back his chair where he has been sitting at the table beside the managerial door, and is knocking on the door and walking inside.

Now there is the sound of heavy footsteps entering the office, and Bob is seeing a broadly built man carrying a large coil of galvanized iron wire in one hand. He is walking up to Mr. Gordling's door, knocking on the panel of it, opening it, and disappearing into the room.

. . . One of the chaps from the factory, Bob's mind is saying. What does he want? . . .

Billy is emerging from Mr. Gordling's room and Bob is turning his head again to see that the boy is gesturing and whispering to indicate that Mr. Gordling wants to see him.

“Good-bye, Watson, and God bless you!” Epsart is grinning at him.

“Farewell—a long farewell!” from the smiling Maindring.

Bob can feel how hot his cheeks are as he is sliding off his stool and walking across the green linoleum on the floor. There seems to be a peculiar buzzing in his head, and the words are crowding into his mind:

. . . Country sales. “Oh, I'm quite confident, sir.” “Mr. Tanson recommended you.” “Yes, sir, I'll begin straight away.” Mr. Gordling. Plenty of ideas. Circulars. . . .

He is knocking on the frosted glass panel of Mr. Gordling's door, is hearing faintly Mr. Gordling's voice saying, “Come in,” is pushing open the door, and walking on to the pale green carpet inside.

“Perfectly useless,” he can hear Mr. Gordling saying.

He is shutting the door behind him, and is turning to see Mr. Gordling and the man from the factory standing together at the window, holding up the coil of galvanized iron wire. The tall, broad form of Mr. Gordling as he is bending over the wire, and turning the coil round and round. His thin, grey hair, his grey bushy moustache, his gold-rimmed pinc-nez tilted on his big nose. He is frowning at the wire as he is carefully examining it in the full light of the window.

“They told me at the shipping office,” the factory man is saying, “that the wire had all been stowed as deck cargo.”

“Yes, that would account for the rust on it,” Mr. Gordling is remarking. “The sea water has got into the cases. What are the other coils like?”

“They're all just as bad. Some of them, I should say, are worse than this one.”

“Utterly useless,” Mr. Gordling is concluding and pursing his lips. “Utterly useless for our purpose. We could never do anything with stuff like this. Good wire, too. But no use whatever with all this rust on it.”

“What are we to do with it, then, sir?”

“Useless—utterly useless. A great pity. We can't possibly accept delivery. I'll telephone the shipping agents and tell them. The whole consignment will have to be put up for auction. How much is there rusted altogether?”

“I should say about eight tons of it, sir.”

“Well, send it all back. We won't take delivery of it in this condition.”

“Very good, sir.”

“All right.”

The man from the factory is walking out of the room, the coil of wire in his hand. Mr. Gordling is turning away from the window and looking at Bob. Bob's heart is thumping.

“Let me see,” Mr. Gordling is saying, one hand on the back of the swivel chair in front of his roll-top desk. “You're Mr. ——? What is your name again?”

“Watson, sir,” Bob is stepping forward to announce.

“Oh yes, I sent for you. Sit down for a moment, will you, Mr. Watson?”

Bob is breathing short little breaths as he is sitting on the edge of the leather-seated chair beside Mr. Gordling's desk. He has a feeling as though there were a current of hot air lifting up his cheeks and the sides of his head—lifting, lifting.

In his mind the words chase one another.

. . . “I can do the work all right, sir.” “Yes, I'm just finishing a course in salesmanship. And I've got crowds of ideas.” I want that job. Give me the

chance and I'll work like fury. "I'm not afraid of work, sir." What Mr. Tanson said. . . .

Mr. Gordling is sitting on his swivel chair and squeaking it round to face his desk. He is lifting up his pen and writing on a small sheet of paper, then pressing the paper on a small spike. Now he is putting his pen down again, and squeaking round his chair to face Bob. Bob is feeling that his heart in its throbbing is so big that it fills his chest.

"I expect you know, Mr. Watson," Mr. Gordling is saying slowly, as he is carefully pulling his pincenez off his nose and tapping the palm of his hand with them—"you know that we are reorganizing the staff here."

"Oh yes, sir."

"And we're making a considerable reduction in numbers all round."

"Yes, sir."

"I very much regret having to do this, but it has become necessary."

"Yes, sir."

"And I want you to understand that we're not sending anybody away on account of inefficiency. It's simply that there isn't the work here to justify the present staff, and it has to be reduced."

"Yes, sir."

"So we shan't need your services here any longer, Mr. Watson."

"Oh—I see, sir." And Bob is swallowing something in his throat.

"You needn't work out your week's notice. You'll be paid an extra week's salary, and you can leave at once, you see."

"Very well, sir."

"All right, Mr. Watson."

Bob has a feeling of whirring in his head as he is standing up. Now as he is walking to the door, his mind is saying:

. . . But that job. Country sales. Someone must have it. Mr. Tanson said you. Mr. Tanson. . . .

His face very red and his heart still thumping, he is turning again to Mr. Gordling and blinking his eyelids nervously as he is saying:

"I understand, sir—that—the country sales—I thought it was arranged that I should be made, sir—head of the country sales. Mr. Tanson——"

Mr. Gordling has turned back to face his desk. He is turning to Bob and shaking his head.

"I know nothing about any such arrangement," he is saying.

"I could do the work, sir," Bob is appealing.

"I couldn't *think* of it. I'm afraid you're much too young."

"It was just that Mr. Tanson told me——"

"Mr. Tanson has nothing to do with this place now. I'm making all my own arrangements. Mr. Boulter is to be head of the country sales."

“I see, sir.”

He is walking across the carpet again, clicking open the door, and appearing to the office. His cheeks still feel burning as he is walking to his desk and forcing a smile on his lips. He is trying to simulate a chuckle as he is answering the looks of inquiry from Maindring, Boulter, and Epsart.

“Well—I'm off!” he is telling them.

“Fair dinkum? Really?” Epsart is saying.

“Fair dinkum. Yes. I'm off.”

“You mean—sacked?”

“Sacked.”

. . . Boulter! Boulter head of the country sales! his mind is saying as he is looking through his desk drawer and with shaking fingers taking out the Ready Reckoner and the rubber eraser that are his personal possessions. . . .

V. Life

He is shaking with excitement as he is walking down the wooden stairs, out through the main doors and down the stone steps into the sunshine of the busy pavement.

. . . What on earth am I going to do? are the words coming into his mind. Out of work. One of the unemployed. Boulter. Between Boulter and me, Gordling chose Boulter. All right. I don't mind. I don't want the job now. Let Boulter make a hopeless mess of it. Old Gordling will find out in time. My God, he's a damn' fool, that old Gordling. He's as blind as fifty bats. The silly old ass. . . .

Outside the building, he is standing still.

The people passing by on the pavement; the noisy tramcars; the cabs and carriages and carts and motor-cars.

. . . Can't tell mum about it, he is thinking. Look round for another job, then tell her I've gone to something better. That silly old ass Gordling. Like to know what Tanson thinks of him. “We shan't need your services here any longer, Mr. Watson.” Huh. First time in my life I've had the sack. I'm not going home yet. Wait a while and think it out. Can't stand here, though. Botanical Gardens. Go there. . . .

He is walking with a brisk step up Spring Street and Bent Street hill, across Bligh Street, Phillip Street, and Macquarie Street, and in through the imposing entrance to the Botanical Gardens. The lawns on either side of the wide gravel pathway, the trees and statues, the fountain, and the vista in the distance of the blue, sparkling waters of the harbour, the warships anchored in Farm Cove, and a Manly ferry steamer gliding in the sunshine towards the Quay.

His hands in his pockets, he is walking on to the lawn to his right, and sauntering past the seats and trees. He is feeling as though Mr. Gordling has thrown him out of the office and kicked him down the stairs. He is feeling knocked about. The keenness has gone out of him, and has left him mentally flabby. His mind is going on:

. . . They don't want me. All right. Have it their own way. I was going to do a damned lot for that Patent Fence Company. But they don't want me. Gordling. Stupid old fool. They can't go on like this, sending everybody away. Tanson. And giving the jobs to fellows like Boulter. The company will smash sooner or later. It isn't that strong. Just as well I'm out of it, perhaps. I'd never have worked under Boulter. I'm not sorry I've left the place. There'll be no progress now that Tanson's gone. It'll be a deadly hole to be in. I'm really *glad* to be out of it. . . .

His shoes pressing into the gently yielding cushion of the grass, his eyes conscious of the sunlit green all around him, his nostrils breathing in the warm, freshening air, his ears hearing the distant clatter and whirring of a lawn-mower and the shrill cries of three little children playing.

. . . What are you going to do, though? his mind is demanding. And what about mother? Oh, mother's all right, whatever happens. She's got money in the bank. Oh, I'll get another job somehow. Not going to bother about it to-day, that's all. Have a good rest over the week end. I don't really care what happens. I'd like to have a good fling. Just forget the whole show for a bit. Let myself go. I've been too cramped up. Been worrying too much about getting on—been too ambitious. And it's all for nothing. Nobody wants you to be keen. Gordling doesn't want acuteness, cleverness. He just wants what he has himself—dullness. He wants—Boulter. That's all. What's the use of trying to forge ahead? Doesn't get you anywhere. "*Much too young.*" They can all keep their jobs. I don't want them . . .

He has come to the crest of a grassy slope, and is sitting down. Now he is reclining against one elbow, aimlessly pulling at the grass, and chewing a blade of it. From where he is reclining he can see, not far away, a girl sitting on a seat, reading. He is idly looking at her, and to him she is very pretty. While his mind is vaguely reaching out for what he can do next towards a livelihood, and he is conscious of the girl on the seat, there is a picture growing in his mind of the face of Muriel Tayne, the musical comedy actress, whom he has seen several times on the stage. He is aware that the girl on the seat is not Muriel Tayne, but he is subconsciously mingling his pleasant memories of Miss Tayne with her, and she is making his amorous feelings towards Miss Tayne all the more strong.

. . . I wish there was a piece in Sydney now with Muriel Tayne, he is thinking at length. I'd go to see it. That's what I feel like. . . .

In a dreamy way he is going on to imagine himself married to the beautiful Muriel Tayne. He is picturing himself caressing her and kissing her, and as he is chewing at the grass and is conscious of his predicament, he is emitting a sigh.

. . . Ah, she's a beautiful girl, Muriel Tayne, the words are coming into his mind. . . .

He is feeling very much that he wants a pretty girl. He is feeling that that is what he wants more than anything, a girl to cuddle and to caress. But he is feeling also that Muriel Tayne, to whom his heart goes out, is inaccessible. It is vain to think of her.

His memory is recalling to him words he has heard this morning spoken by Boulter and Maindring:

. . . "I say a chap's a fool not to." "She said, 'twenty-five shillings.' " "Some girls—willing to take ten shillings." . . .

He is remembering the picture that Osden had drawn and presented to Epsart of the nude figure of a woman. He is remembering what Epsart said about the women who went to Osden's flat and about the pictures round his walls.

He is imagining himself meeting a pretty girl in the street and going away with her. He is loving her very dearly. He is assuming in her all the physical allurements of Muriel Tayne, and it is all that goes to make up his conception of Muriel Tayne that he is loving in the girl he has met in the street.

At length his dreams and imaginings are making him feel dreadfully restless and discontented, until he is sighing again and standing up. His hands in his pockets, he is strolling slowly and carelessly down the slope and along the lawn at the foot of it. He is following the gravel pathway past the refreshment kiosk, across more lawns, and to the broad pathway along the edge of the harbour, flanked by a stone wall and leading back to the jetties and wharves and the tramcar depot of Fort Macquarie.

. . . Why *shouldn't* I get hold of some little tart? his mind is pursuing. "I say a chap's a fool not to." "Why shouldn't he?" "Oh, certainly." And for ten shillings, too. Even if it was twenty-five shillings. Your mother would be grief-stricken to think of you. Yes, but——. Mother —she need never know. No. But—I don't know. She thinks you would never do anything wrong. You've led her to think you're as pure-minded as an angel. You've always told her you weren't interested in girls. Well, neither am I, really. It's just——. She wouldn't understand. She couldn't help me. I want a woman. That's what I want. And there isn't a fellow of my age who doesn't. There you are. There's the fact—straight. I can't help it. I didn't make myself. I don't want all this business, really. But it's just there, and you

can't get away from it. I've tried to ignore it. I've tried to bottle myself up. But I'm just humbugging myself. I want to get on in life and make money, and I want to forget all these feelings about women. And there I was building on the idea of getting on in this Patent Fence Company, and it's all come to nothing now. Here I am stranded. And—well—there it is. I'm at a loose end. Damn all these feelings about wanting a woman. But you can't get away from them. If any fellows are more than five minutes talking together, they drift on to the subject of girls. It's all this, all the time, all around you. You can't escape it. And I know I want a woman. But what can you do? . . .

He is feeling very unhappy as he is sauntering along. It is not lightening his spirits to picture himself going off with some woman he might pick up in one of the city streets. Mingled with these images in his mind, there come the words:

. . . Wrong. Sin. Wickedness. . . .

And his forehead is puckered in perplexity.

. . . You might get diseased, too, he is going on to think. That would be an appalling thing. The disgrace. Yes, I know. And I don't want any of these women. It's not that. But what are you to do? What does the whole thing mean? I suppose I'm a depraved devil to have these feelings at all. And then every fellow of my age is depraved. We're a sinful lot of blighters. Which seems nonsense. We're just natural. Yet why is it natural to have these feelings if there's no fulfilment of them that isn't wicked and taking the risk of a fatal disease? I suppose I ought to be married. But if that's the solution, I ought to have been married two or three years ago. And how on earth could I have got married then? I couldn't keep a wife even now. I haven't met the girl I'd marry, anyway. I must just suppress myself, I suppose. Suppression! Suppression! Ah! . . .

He is sitting on a seat in a shaded part of the lawn near the harbour front.

. . . My life's just a muddle now. It's all upside down. It's all tangled and knotted and mauled about. I'm at a dead end. And I'm tired of it all. What am I to do? It's no use talking to anybody. Nobody would really understand you. Nobody who wasn't young. And fellows like myself are just as much in a muddle as I am. I wouldn't dare speak to mother. She'd be awfully shocked. It'd upset her terribly, with the ideas she has of me. It's not a subject you want to talk about to anybody, anyway. Anybody decent, I mean. The whole thing is just an awful, rotten business. . . .

Later he is deciding,

. . . Better go home to lunch. Mother will have it ready. If she asks me about the country sales job, what am I to tell her? Tell her nothing's been done about it yet. No use telling her the truth. She get's so frightened. She'd

be in an awful state if I told her I'd been given the sack . . .

Very dejected, he is emerging from the Botanical Gardens at Fort Macquarie, and now he is walking along the dusty street past the bondage warehouse, wool stores, and wharf buildings, towards Circular Quay.

The jangle and clatter of horse lorries and carts rumbling over the uneven wood blocks forming the road surface. The dust raised by the noisy electric trams.

He is seeing a horse-drawn lorry clattering towards him. It is loaded with something.

. . . What is it? he is thinking. Oh—coils of barbed wire. Wondered whatever it was. It's wonderful how machinery turns out that stuff. The plain wire is fed into the machine, and it's twisted and the barbs worked into it. . . .

In his imagination he is seeing the wire scraping through the machine—scraping, scraping through.

. . . No wonder the wire's clean and polished by the time it comes out, his mind is going on. Take anything off it, like rust or anything. That wire the chap from the factory was showing to Gordling. Why the blazes didn't somebody think of having *that* made into barbed wire? It had rust on it, but only in places. It wasn't so bad as all that. The machinery would scrape all that rust off while it was making it into barbed wire. Silly asses they were. Nobody thought of that. And now the wire's going to be put up for auction sale Gordling wouldn't take delivery of it . . . Great shocks! I wonder! I wonder! . . . My God! I wonder! . . . Rusted wire—barbed wire. Make it into barbed wire. . . .

VI. Conference

At half-past one he is sitting at luncheon with mother. He is looking at the two chops on his plate, and the pool of juice beside them, and is cutting into the meat on one of the chops as mother is taking up her knife and fork and asking,

“Well, what's the news this morning?”

He is shaking his head while he is eating, and answering, “Nothing.”

“You've still heard nothing from Mr. Gordling about the new position?”

“Eh?”

“You know—what you were talking about before breakfast. You're to be made head of the country sales. Have they still told you nothing?”

“Listen, ma!” he is exclaiming, putting down his knife and fork, and looking up at her. “I've got a chance to make about seventy pounds.”

“Have you really?”

“Well, *about* seventy pounds. It may be more, and it may be a bit less.”

“You do amaze me, the things you come out with. How do you think you're going to make seventy pounds?”

“Easily.” And he is picking up the salt-cellar and tapping the base of it on the table-cloth in emphasis.

“But how?”

“Listen. There's a lot of galvanized iron wire arrived by steamer to-day for the Patent Fence Company, and it's been discovered that about eight tons of it has been damaged by water owing to being stowed as deck cargo. It's become rusted in a good many places, you see. Mr. Gordling——”

“Who is Mr. Gordling?”

“Oh, I've told you dozens of times that Mr. Gordling is the managing director of the Patent Fence Company. But listen. Mr. Gordling has refused to take delivery of this rusted wire, and it's to be sold by auction. It will be sold at next to nothing.”

“Surely you wouldn't think of buying it, would you?”

“Just listen. You know barbed wire, don't you?”

“I think so.”

“Yes, you know. It's made up by machinery. And in the process of the machinery gripping the wire, it naturally scrapes it. It can't help doing it, you see. Now, don't you see? I could buy that rusted wire at an awfully low price, spend a few pounds having it made into barbed wire, and by the time the machinery had finished with it, the rust would all be scraped off, and the finished article would be indistinguishable from brand-new barbed wire!”

“But you don't——”

“Just assume that I buy that rusty wire for four or five pounds a ton. That would be between thirty and forty pounds I'd paid for the eight tons, you see.” And he is pulling an envelope from his coat pocket, a pencil from a pocket in his waistcoat, and is writing the figures on the envelope back.

“Between thirty and forty pounds! But where ——?”

“Wait a bit. Thirty or forty pounds. Say that I pay thirty-five pounds—I'll work it at that. I ought to be able to sell it as barbed wire for perhaps fifteen pounds a ton.”

“Do you mean to say——?”

“Now wait until I finish. Fifteen pounds a ton. And what did I say? Eight tons. That's—that's—a hundred and twenty pounds, isn't it? And I buy at thirty-five pounds. Take off fifteen pounds for the factory's charges and for general handling expenses. Result is—seventy pounds profit!”

He is drawing a sharp line across the paper and looking up at mother in triumph. Mother is just nodding her head at him.

"It sounds *quite* all right," she is agreeing. "But what I should like to know is——"

"Now, what? What's the matter with it?" He is challenging her as he is returning the envelope and the pencil to the pockets from which he took them.

"Where are you going to get the money from to buy the wire in the first place?"

He is picking up his knife and fork again and resuming his carving operations on the chop.

"That's just what I don't know," he is saying softly, though he is thinking, . . . I do know—really. . . .

"You haven't got thirty or forty pounds yourself, have you?" mother is asking him.

"No—I have not."

"Then I don't see any use your thinking about it."

He is shifting restlessly on his chair, and the words are coming into his mind:

. . . We'll see about that. . . .

"And you haven't heard anything further about getting this new position?" mother is asking him after a while.

He is making no reply, and just eating meat from the chops, now grown cold and the fat become white grease.

"Bob?"

"Look here, ma." And he is again taking the salt-cellar and tapping it on the table-cloth. "Look here: You've got some money in the bank, haven't you?"

"Yes; but—my dearest—"

"Now don't go on talking. You let me have forty pounds. Just a loan, I mean. Lend me forty pounds just for a few weeks. You can have it back again then."

"Oh, I couldn't dream of such a thing. It would be——"

"There would be absolutely no risk *whatever!*" he is declaring firmly, his cheeks red.

"But I couldn't possibly let you have it."

"Why not?" There is a feeling of anger in him, but he is trying to suppress it.

"Oh, I couldn't think of it!"

"But—why *not*—mother dear?" And there is a frown on his forehead and he is feeling that he does not want any more of the chops. He is pushing the plate away from him.

"What! Speculate with *my* money! Well!"

"It is *not* speculation! I can return you that money—as—sure—as—I'm—sitting—in—this—room!" And there are more sharp taps from the salt-cellar.

"Yes—but—but—"

"But what?"

"It might all come to nothing, Bob. Then where should *I* be?"

"Nothing—fiddlesticks! How on earth can it come to nothing?" His face is now very red while he is speaking. "There isn't any element of risk. It's all as plain as can be. It can't come to *nothing!*"

"I wish you wouldn't think of so many schemes. I wish you'd leave all this thing alone."

"I will not leave it alone. Listen to me: *You—will—get—your—money—back!* What more do you want?"

"I've only got your word for it."

"Well, haven't you got confidence in me?"

"You're still quite young, you know."

"I'm not. I mean, if I am"—he is using his fist on the table now—"I've got a dashed sight more sense than most men twice my age!"

"I don't know what to do with you. You just amaze me."

He is feeling pride that he should amaze her. His cheeks are still hot and flushed but he is not feeling so angry. He is pulling a junk off the piece of bread on his plate and chewing it. He is swallowing it before it is properly masticated, and saying while he is pointing his forefinger at mother:

"I'll give you my absolute personal guarantee that you'll get back your money, mother! You just lend me the money and see. You can't possibly lose a cent. Even if I don't get my money returned to me by selling the wire again, I'll pay you back some other way."

"I don't know what to do."

"Oh, mother!"

"You must give me time to think."

"There's no need to think. I've done all the thinking that's necessary. I've thought it all out."

"If it was Mr. Gordling who was telling you to do all this, I'd believe it was all right. Don't you think it strange that Mr. Gordling didn't decide to turn the wire into barbed wire?"

"No. You don't understand that Gordling is dead from the neck up. He never gets an idea—not once in fifty years. He's simply fast asleep."

"Dear, dear, dear! The way you talk, Bob!"

"It's perfectly true. These old people like Gordling have no brains. They don't think. They just drift on and on."

"I'd like to know what Mr. Gordling would say about that."

“Anyhow, it's as plain as anything that my scheme can't possibly fail. And it might mean a tremendous lot to me, mother. If I bring off this deal successfully, I'll have seventy pounds to dabble about with.”

“What will you do with it?”

“Look around for something more to buy that I can sell at a big profit. In time I could work up a big business, just buying and selling. Later on I might begin to import things, get agencies for things. There's no end to what I might be able to do. And this will be a rattling good start.”

“But you'd never have time to do all this as well as your work at the Patent Fence Company. And if you're head of the country sales there, and later on perhaps you step into Mr. Tanson's position——”

“Oh—the Patent Fence Company——!”

“You don't mean to say that you'd give up your position there?”

“Absolutely.”

“When you're just going to be made head of the country sales?”

“Oh, I'm not so keen on that by a long way.”

“Well, you surprise me—the way you change. You were so full of the new position this morning, and what you were going to do.”

“This would be far better. I'd be independent. I wouldn't be getting just a measly wage.”

“A measly wage—yes. But you can be sure of it. What would happen if your new business didn't bring you in anything for a month or so at a time? How could we keep on here?”

“But how about if my new business brought me three or four times as much as I can earn at the Patent Fence Company?”

“Yes, but you can't be sure, can you? If you could be sure——”

“Everything's a risk, my dear ma. There isn't a single thing in this world that is absolutely sure.”

“That's just the trouble. And I can't afford to take risks. I do wish you'd just go on quietly with the Patent Fence Company—even if you don't get promoted to be head of the country sales.”

“You don't want to lend me the forty pounds?”

Mother is taking his plate with the remnants of chops on it, putting it on her own, pushing back her chair, and getting up from the table. She is putting the plates on the sideboard, taking from it a glass dish of stewed peaches and a bowl of custard, and setting them on the table.

“Mother,” Bob is repeating, “you don't want to lend me the money?”

Mother is sighing as she is taking two clean plates from the top of the sideboard, and putting these, too, on the table.

“Oh, dear,” she is saying at length, “you're a terrible worry—the way you keep on and on.”

“Well, that's just the fact, isn't it? You don't want to lend me that forty pounds?”

Mother is slightly frowning as she is sitting down again and drawing in her chair.

“You'll have some peaches and custard, won't you?” she is asking him, holding a spoon above the glass dish.

“First of all—are you going to lend me this forty pounds?”

She is resting the spoon in the peach juice.

“Bob, how can I?” He is seeing that her face is looking worried as she is turning to him.

“I've told you there's no risk. You'll get back your money. And it will mean a lot to me.”

“If I had tons of money, now——”

“I don't want tons of money.”

“Yes—but—but—don't you see what I mean? If I was rolling in wealth, you could have the money, and I wouldn't care if I never saw it again. But I'm not rolling in wealth, Bob. I've got only a hundred pounds in the bank.”

“It's quite all right. If you don't want to help me——”

“Now, you know it's not that. Of course I want to help you. But how *can* I lend you this money? What *would* I do if I didn't get it back?”

“All right—all right. I've told you enough times that you will get it back. But it doesn't matter.”

He is feeling miserably unhappy.

“You must see, Bob, that I can't afford to take the slightest risk. And you know that there is at least some risk with this idea of yours.”

“You wouldn't take that small risk for my sake?”

“Oh, I don't say that.”

“Well, put it any way you like. It amounts to the same thing.”

“Bob!”

He is shrugging his shoulders. Mother is breathing a sigh.

“Now, you'll have some peaches and custard, won't you?” she is asking, after a pause.

“I'm not really hungry.”

“But they're so nice. I was sure you'd like them. Have just a small helping.”

“Really——”

“Just to please *me*.”

“Well, just a very little.”

She is passing him his plateful of peaches and custard.

“You're not feeling tired, are you?” she is asking, looking at him keenly.

“No. Why, do I look it?”

“Yes, I thought you looked quite worn out. And it's your half-holiday, to-day. You shouldn't be so tired.”

“I'm not tired. I'm all right.”

“I want you to be bright for Judith's party this evening, you know.”

“I'm quite all right..”

“Judith has just asked one or two friends. You remember Nona Richfield? She's going to be there.”

. . . I'm not interested in that girl, he is reflecting. She used to be just a silly little tart. Nothing in her. That forty pounds. Now I wonder would Harold help me? Ask him to-night. Forty pounds. . . .

VII. Evening

At seven o'clock in the evening he is sitting before the dining table at Judith's home in Claverley.

The brightness of the table under the light of the incandescent gas lamp; the pink roses in the white bowl in front of him; the silver cruet with its glass bottles between him and the white bowl, the plate before him containing tinned salmon and salad; the dark hair and the sharp features of Judith at the head of the table at his left, mother at his right, the cheerful, smiling full-faced Harold at the other end of the table, the dark-complexioned, beaming and buxom Mrs. Richfield opposite mother; and the glossy dark hair, the brown eyes, the olive skin, the full, bow-like lips, the curve of the shoulders under the pale green silk dress, the hint of swelling breast below the line of the green silk, the bare arms and the neat small hands—of Nona.

While in his ears there are the sounds of Harold's laughter and his jolly talk, of mother's and Mrs. Richfield's laughing responses to him, and of Judith's attempted conversation with Nona, Bob is feeling that his heart is pumping blood round his body in an unusual degree. He is feeling flushed and as if there is a rush of hot, dry air up his face. His whole nature seems quickened. He is feeling buoyed up, lifted out of himself. There is a feeling of ache just above his heart. As he is eating salmon and salad and is looking up at Nona between every mouthful, the words are coming into his mind:

. . . Would never have believed it. Nona Richfield. Just a kid when I saw her last. Can't believe she would have changed so much. She used to be nothing like so pretty. Well, she was always pretty in a way. But——. It's quite six years ago since I saw her last. She must be about twenty now. Nona Richfield. She's utterly different. I'd never have recognized her. Fancy! . . .

He cannot help a smile staying on his lips as he is being bathed in the atmosphere of Nona's proximity.

"It's a long time since you saw Nona, isn't it, Bob?" Judith is turning to him to ask.

He is smiling at Nona's pretty face as he is answering, "I'm sure it must be years."

Nona is looking up and smiling at him, and making him experience a feeling of sick heaviness at the bottom of his chest.

. . . Oh pretty! Pretty girl, the words are coming into his mind. . . .

"I remember when it was," Nona is saying. "It was years ago when I used to go to the High School. Don't you remember, Bob?"

"I think I do—in a way."

Though the occasion is really vivid in his memory.

"In the tram, don't you remember?" Nona is pursuing quietly and rather shyly.

"Yes, I think I do just faintly remember now." And he is reflecting:

. . . Fancy *her* remembering about that. . . .

Judith is turning to Nona again, and Bob's mind is reiterating:

. . . Oh pretty! Oh, oh! Oh so pretty! *Pretty!* Could never have *imagined* it. Pretty, pretty girl. Oh my word, she is . . .

As he is silently observing her between periods of manipulating the food on his plate, his eyes are feasting on the delicate texture of her skin—her cheeks, her neck, her breast, her shoulders, her arms, her hands. He is feeling that Nona is very desirable to him. He is feeling that something in his breast is going out to something in Nona's breast. Though her eyes are now turned away from him, he is remembering just the manner of her looking up and smiling at him before, and he is gathering from it a feeling that he is not without favour in her sight. . . .

At half-past nine, while Judith, mother, Harold and Mrs. Richfield are sitting round the dining room table playing euchre, Bob is sitting beside Nona on the couch in the little sitting-room annex. All the feeling of happiness has gone from him. He has a sensation of something in him weighing him down. It is as if there is a big sigh in his chest. He is wanting—wanting. His arms have an ache in them. It is as though they are wanting to be wound round Nona's shoulders and ache from his constant repression of their desire. There is a tingling sensation all over him. He is feeling that to talk is idle; but he is trying to keep alive any kind of conversation that will stave off an embarrassing silence that he feels is going to overwhelm them sooner or later.

"Nice home Judith has now, hasn't she?" he is saying in an assumed tone of light-heartedness.

"I think it's just too splendid," Nona is answering simply, nodding her head and looking pensively down at her hands in her lap.

"She's always doing something, you know. Never gives herself any rest, you know."

"She just lives for her home."

"Yes, she does that—really. Yes."

"I'm sure she's marvellous."

"Do you think so?"

"I think she's an awfully clever girl."

"Huh. I suppose so—perhaps."

"She's so unselfish."

"Yes, perhaps so."

"I think she's awfully unselfish myself."

"Well—yes."

"The way she works for Harold."

"Oh, she works hard, I know."

"It's all for his sake that she wants to keep the home so tidy."

"Yes, I suppose it is."

"She's told me that often."

"Yes, of course, I believe she is very unselfish in that way."

"I admire Judith tremendously."

"Do you? Well, yes. You know—they—seem to get on jolly well together, too."

"Oh, they're wonderful."

"H'm."

"I adore Harold, of course. Everybody does."

"He's so awfully jolly, isn't he?"

"You know, he dotes on Judith."

"And Judith dotes on him!"

"Oh, she *does*."

"Yes."

"I think it's beautiful to see people in love with one another."

"Well, yes, it is."

"I love to come here just for that reason!"

"Ha, ha! I wonder what Judith would say if she knew that? She'd laugh, I'm sure."

"Well, perhaps she would. But it's true!"

He is feeling that Nona is extremely sweet as she is sitting here saying these things. He is feeling that he would like dearly to sit very close to her, then to put his arms round her and kiss her. But the thought of this in his mind is making him feel very hot in the face and to have a throbbing of

blood in his head, and he is continuing to allow a distance of several inches to separate them. Somehow there is a great feeling of hunger in his chest. He is feeling that he wants to press Nona to him there. He is just longing.

“Do you often come to see Judith?” he is saying.

“Fairly often.” His mind is suggesting to him:

. . . “Because you like to see people in love?” . . .

But the idea of uttering the word “love” to Nona is making his heart beat harder than ever. Still, he is wanting very much to keep Nona talking about coming to Judith's to be in the company of people who love one another. While he is trying to muster courage to put his question, he is feeling very strongly that sigh inside him. It is like a burden.

His arms with their aching, his heart with its furious throb, his whole body with its curious sensation of tingling, his chest burdened with this feeling like a great sigh—suddenly with a desperate determination he is getting the words out of his mouth:

“You do come fairly often to see—Judith—because—you—you want to—you sort of want to—in a way—er—like to see—Judith is so much in love with—with Harold, isn't she, don't you think?”

But now there is the voice of Judith from the dining room:

“You're not sitting on those cushions in there, are you, Bob?”

“Eh?” He is turning quickly round to look through to the dining room table.

“The cushions on the sofa. You're not sitting on them, are you?”

He is suddenly aware that he is indeed seated on a cushion.

“Why? Mustn't I sit on them?”

“Oh, goodness me! Of course not!” And Judith is hastening across the dining room floor and entering the annex. “Oh, Bob!” she is remonstrating, a frown on her face, as he is lifting the silk cushion from under him. “You *are* awful. I *never* meant those cushions to be sat on.”

He is feeling ashamed to be reprimanded in front of Nona.

“I'm most terribly sorry, Judith,” he is saying. “I won't do it again.”

“That's all very well. But you're always doing things like this. The last time you were here you walked right over my beautiful polished floor. And I see to-night that you went and planked your hat and coat right down on the hall chair. It looks frightfully untidy. There are any amount of pegs in the hall stand. I wish you'd be more considerate. You make the place look like a pig sty.”

“I always forget. But I'm really sorry.”

And he is truly feeling that he does not wish to give Judith extra work just because of his carelessness.

“Anyhow, we're going to have supper now. Come along, Nona.”

The tall form of Harold is walking up to Judith. He is putting his arm round her waist, and saying smilingly, "Supper, children! Come to supper! Tarry not!"

But Judith is writhing impatiently and pulling his arm away from her.

"Oh, for goodness' sake!" she is exclaiming. "Don't always be putting your arm round me." And then smiling at her own petulance, "If you want to make a fool of yourself in front of everybody, there's no need to make a fool of me, too."

Mother and Mrs. Richfield are laughing as Harold is mockingly biting his lip and rapidly blinking his eyes. Bob is thinking:

. . . Harold. About that money. . . .

VIII. Mother

Late this night, he is unlocking the front door at home, pushing the door open, and mother is wiping her feet on the mat, then walking past him and mounting the step into the darkness of the hall.

"Oh," she is sighing as she does so, "it's a blessing to be home! I'll be glad when I'm in bed."

Bob is making no response as he is pulling the key out of the lock, dropping it into his trouser pocket, following mother into the hall, shutting the door with a t-lock behind him. As he is standing in the darkness with his back to the door, he can hear mother breathing.

"Can't find those matches," she is saying. "Oh, here they are."

There is the sound of a match being scratched against its box, there is a flare, and a flickering, dancing light on the end of the little stick held in mother's hand is revealing her and the hall-stand in front of her.

He is feeling tired and inclined to a reflective mood. His mind is saying:

. . . Nona. Nona Richfield. That forty pounds. Harold. Nona Richfield. Very decent Harold was. "You can rely on me, Bob. Ask me for the cheque whenever you want it." Can buy that wire now. Nona. Nona Richfield. Nona. Nona. . . .

Mother is moving slowly along the hall, her hand sheltering the trembling match flame, and entering her bedroom doorway on the right. He is walking slowly after her. There is a sound like plop! and there is light in the room.

A worried expression is on his face as he is walking into mother's bedroom. He is feeling that he wants to say something to her—and yet doesn't. He is remembering her disinclination at lunch time to lend him the forty pounds, and he is conscious of a subtle barrier of disharmony between them. Despite his knowledge that he can get the money from

Harold, there is a load of worry in his heart.

Mother is lowering her hand from having adjusted the tap of the incandescent gas lamp, and is turning towards him.

"You're going to bed straight away, I suppose, are you?" she is asking.

"Yes—I think so."

"Well, good-night, dear. I'm fearfully tired."

She is putting her arms round him and kissing him, but his response to her is not so ready to-night. He is embracing her, but is aware that he would not have minded if he had not done so.

"Good-night, mother."

"Good-night, dear. Sleep well. Good-night."

She is kissing him again; now they are parting, and he is walking towards the door and the semidarkness of the hall. But his step is tardy, for he is still wanting to say something to her that he has not said. The urge in him to do so is like an increasing feeling of pressure inside him. He is swallowing a lump in his throat, and now turning round with his back against the edge of the door.

"Mother," he is saying.

"Well?" She is putting off her hat and placing it in the wardrobe, her back to him.

"What would you say—what would you say if I—if I *did* think sometime about—well, about getting married?"

"Married?" And mother is turning round in front of the wardrobe and staring at him as he is gently swinging the bedroom door with a motion of his back. He is not saying anything more, and his eyes are directed to the carpet.

"What do you mean?" mother is asking, and walking towards him. "You're not thinking of getting married, are you?"

"No! Of course not. But *if*——"

"If what?"

"If I did think about it?"

She is frowning at him.

"You told me this morning you'd made up your mind that you'd never get married."

"Yes—I know."

"You were going to be quite content to live on here with me. You said so. Don't you remember?"

"Of course I do," he is saying, and frowning down at the carpet. "But I'm just *saying*."

"Oh, you wouldn't be talking like this if you hadn't something on your mind. What is it?"

"I'm not thinking about *anything*."

"Don't tell me it's Nona Richfield."

"I'm not thinking of getting married at all. You know I haven't enough to get married on."

"Well, what do you want to upset me like this for?"

"I don't want to upset you, my dear mother."

He is looking up at her now. She is standing at the foot of the bed, her hands one on another on the bed post.

"You change so suddenly," she is saying. "I don't know where I am with you. In the morning you don't care anything about girls: now at night you've got marriage on your mind. I don't want you to stay single just for me; I'd like to see you happily married; but you're so sudden."

He is not answering, and after a little while she is going on:

"It *was* too good to be true that we should really be able to live on here just by ourselves. But you were so sure about it this morning: I really thought you'd made up your mind."

She is inhaling a deep breath and turning her face away from him as she is saying,

"Still, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter what happens to your poor old mother."

A rush of affection is in possession of him, and he is walking to her, putting his arms around her, and kissing the moisture on her cheeks. She is remaining just negative in his hands, blinking her eyes, and there is a catch in her breath.

Now he is releasing her.

"You're tired," he is saying—"that's the trouble. You know, I haven't said at all that I was going to get married. Good-night, you *silly* old mother!"

She is not making any reply, and he is walking quickly out of the room, quietly shutting the door, and feeling his way down the hall.

. . . Nona Richfield, are the words in his mind. . . .

IX. In the Dark

He is still dejectedly moody as he is groping into his bedroom. The lesser darkness of outside is showing up the window at the far side of the room, and moodily he is walking over to the window, sitting up on the table in front of it, and feeling his feet on to the chair. As he is looking through the window, he can see in the distance objects like clusters of jewels slowly moving, and knows them to be lighted ferry steamers plying across the harbour. Beyond the courses of the ferries he is seeing the twinkling lights of Sydney. And he is thinking:

. . . Nona Richfield. Oh, Nona. Nona. Oh, I love you, Nona. Sweet pretty little girl. Oh, she is so beautiful. Nona. Oh, Nona darling. Lovely wonderful girl. Oh, I do love you, Nona. You are just a dear sweet bundle of love. You are wanting to be loved; and I'm wanting to love you. Oh, I could love you so much. I want you, Nona darling. You are everything that is sweet and beautiful. Oh, you are so pretty. You dear, dear little girl. Oh, you were just made to be loved. You are just ready for someone to love you. She likes to see people who love one another. That is because there is so much love in herself. And she is starving for someone to love her truly. Oh, I could love her. She is so unselfish, and she sees unselfishness in Judith. But it is she herself who is so utterly unselfish. She is just all love. Marriage. To marry her. Oh, I must work hard. I'll work like the devil. I'll make money come in from all directions. For you, Nona. Ask her to marry me. I wouldn't ask her until I was well established. If I can't give her every comfort I don't want her to be with me. I could still love her. When I'm making plenty of money, then I'll ask her. But I do love her so much. The dear little girl. Have to fix mother up some way. I don't know. Some way or other. "It doesn't matter what happens to your poor old mother." Selfish. No. Oh, no. I don't want to think that. Mother. I can't help it. Selfish. That forty pounds. The risk. For my sake. Selfishness. Just thinking of herself. Her own safety. She's afraid. Always herself. She wasn't thinking of my good. I don't want to be thinking this sort of thing. Mother. But there it is. The truth glaring at you. You can't get away from it. I can see through and through her. Afraid to lend me that money. She wants just for us both to go on living together—just by ourselves—safely. Her own comfort. Her own safety. Nobody else. Right away at the back of her nature, the motive that impels her to everything she does: selfishness. . . .

His heart is thudding against his ribs as he is allowing himself to go on thinking like this. He is feeling miserably sad and tired; and he is conscious that an ideal figure is slipping from his mind.

Chapter Four: The Married Man's Day

I. Semi-Conscious

At six o'clock on a morning in July of 1914 he is lying on his side in the double bed at the North Shore house, now his own. His eyes are closed, and though he is aware that he is not any longer asleep, he is not feeling that he wants to be fully awake.

Dreamily his mind is occupied with a series of pictures. In one of them he is being congratulated years ago on his success in making nearly a hundred pounds profit from the sale of rusted wire made up into apparently new barbed wire; and a smile is growing on his face as his mind is filled with the picture of himself spending the money on that dilapidated old motor-boat, having it repaired and painted and selling it at a clear profit of eighty pounds; and now the picture is in his mind of the quantity of coal he bought cheaply when there seemed the possibility of a coal strike and of the money he made out of its sale when the strike had eventuated. His mind is bringing up the picture of his first city office, the tiny room and the few bits of furniture. He is instantly comparing it with his present office, the large room on the third floor of the new building in Pitt Street. He is seeing the inscription on the list of occupants of the third floor: "Robert Watson, Broker and Importer."

He is seeing the face of Miss Delaine, his typist, as she is sitting at her desk and as she is looking up at him when he is pausing in the dictation of a letter to her. He can see her full head of fair hair, the lustre of it, her long eye-lashes, her blue eyes, her powdered cheeks, her small, retroussé nose, her rouged lips, the long V-shaped opening of her décolleté blouse, so tantalizing to him with its glimpse of her breast.

He is wondering what he would feel like to be kissing Miss Delaine, and his mind is picturing him doing so. He is feeling himself pressing her body against him, feeling the motions of her breathing against his chest. Vaguely he is trying to imagine the sensation of kissing Miss Delaine's powdered cheeks, with the smell of the powder in his nostrils and the dryness of the powder on his lips. He is wondering dreamily would he taste the rouge if he kissed Miss Delaine's lips. He is wondering whether it would not be more pleasant to kiss Miss Delaine if she were not powdered or rouged.

He is trying to imagine the feeling of having Miss Delaine in bed with him, of cuddling her tightly, of kissing her passionately. In a hazy way he is imagining Nona's indignation at his intimacy with Miss Delaine, and he is resenting Nona's interference with his liberty to love Miss Delaine as

much as he wants to. Indistinctly he is beginning to argue the reasonableness of a man being allowed to love more than one woman—the silliness of jealousy—the cramping effect of a single affection. He is feeling angry with Nona.

Now he is remembering the gold-capped upper tooth on the left side of Miss Delaine's mouth, and at once the idea of having Miss Delaine in bed with him, even of kissing Miss Delaine, is seeming repulsive. The gold tooth is signifying a flashiness of character that is most unattractive to him. He is opening his eyes and yawning, and his mind is going on:

. . . Oh, be bothered! Miss Delaine. Nonsense. Don't want her one bit. Shut up. . . .

He is lazily twisting on to his back and his eyes are turned to the smiling face of Nona lying on her side and looking up at him with her shining bright brown eyes.

“Oh—you awake?” he is saying and turning over to her.

“Of course—I've been awake more than an hour—waiting for you, you sleepy old head.” And she is pouting and pretending to look wrathful at him, and to his eyes only succeeding in looking wonderfully pretty beneath her head of dark hair.

He is feeling a longing to cuddle her and their arms are going out to one another.

“Darling!” he is exclaiming, as he is kissing her dark-complexioned cheeks.

She is saying nothing, but is turning up her lips for him to kiss. Now she is nestling close against him and his arms are drawing her tightly to him. He is kissing her hair.

. . . Dear little child! the words are in his mind. Lovely little wife. Darling Nona. Sweetest cherub. I made no mistake when I married my dear little Nona. . . .

For a while they are revelling in one another's nearness, and every now and then he is kissing her or she is turning up her face to kiss him. He is feeling the cosiness of the warm bed and of Nona's warm body against him, and his thoughts are going on:

. . . Marriage—it's the best thing. It's the natural life. A fellow ought to be married. The ideal thing. A man's unnatural alone. He's only half a human-being. It takes the man and the woman to make life complete. Darling Nona . . .

At length the word “Badelaw” is coming into his mind, and he is at once feeling alert and is shifting his body from its position of ease.

“What's the time?” he is asking, stretching his neck in order to see the clock on the table by Nona's side of the bed. “Quarter to seven. I must be

getting up.”

“Oh, don't get up now. Stay a little longer. It's so nice here.”

He is smiling down at her from where he is raised on his elbow. Now he is kissing her and saying,

“It's all very well—but I've got work to do. I've got a big day before me.”

“But I've had hardly any cuddle at all this morning. You were such a long time waking up, and now you want to go.”

“Oh, poor little cherub! Yum-yum-yum-yum! We can have an extra long cuddle to-night.”

“When you'll be too tired!”

“I'll get up on the tick of seven. There, how about that?”

She is smiling triumphantly, grasping him, and pulling him down to her again.

. . . I really ought to be getting up now, though, he is thinking. . . .

“What is there you have to do to-day?” Nona is asking.

“No end of things”—and his body is all alive at the prospect. “There's Badelaw, for one thing.”

“The man with the new typewriter?”

“Yes. Nona, if I can get the agency for these new machines, we'll make stacks of money.”

“I hope those other people don't get the agency, then.”

“They're fighting for it, I know. They see the selling possibilities in it as much as I do. But I'm going to fight them for it.”

“When will Mr. Badelaw decide who is to have the agency?”

“Well, I want to make him decide to-day. He's over here from America for only a few weeks, and he wants to get down to Melbourne as soon as he can: so he won't waste much more time over it. But just imagine a typewriter that absolutely makes no sound and that anybody can operate as quickly as you can dictate. Saves no end of time! It'll sell like mad when it's known. It works, because I've tested it. Badelaw's firm will allow fifty per cent. discount and will spend five thousand pounds spread over a year on national advertising to help the first sales. I've just a suspicion that Blake and Crobe are willing to take lower terms than these, and I must talk to Badelaw before he gives the agency to Blake and Crobe.”

Nona is clasping him more tightly and nestling still closer to him. He is thinking:

. . . I mustn't let this Speedtype Writer agency slip by me, whatever happens. I'll fight Blake and Crobe for it on whatever ground they choose. Lower terms? All right, I'll go one better than them. . . .

“It ought to be possible to sell twenty or thirty thousand of these Speedtype Writers a year,” he is going on to say. “Every firm will be

wanting them. They're indispensable, once you understand all that they mean in an office.”

“It's because of this agency that you want to buy the Mordril building, is it?”

“Yes, of course. I want to be able to show Badelaw that I can give a decent display of the Speedtype Writers. I must have a good ground floor with display windows. This Mordril building in Hunter Street is going cheaply because the owner needs the money and he can't afford to do the place up. It wants a few hundred pounds spent on it. If I can get it at the right price, I'll have the ground floor myself and rent the three upper stories as offices. It's just a matter of my being able to get the bank to stand behind me, and I'll have that building. It's a wonderful investment apart from the fact that I want it for the Speedtype Writer agency. I've got to be seeing about all that to-day. It's not plain sailing, either. A lot of other people are after this Mordril building. It's going to be a scramble.”

“You'll be awfully busy, darling.”

“And I've got that quantity of boric acid powder and borax glass not sold yet. I must get rid of that stuff and get the money. The market's all flop for it.”

“Are you sure you're not doing too much?”

“Don't be silly, little love. There, it's seven o'clock. I mustn't wait a minute longer.”

There are more kisses, and now she is tardily releasing him.

He is stretching and yawning, and now he is yielding to the temptation to shut his eyes and let himself rest again. He is realizing that he is indeed still very tired.

“You're not properly waked up,” Nona is telling him. “You were terribly tired last night, and now you haven't had enough rest.”

“Yes, I have,” he is saying, and yawning again. “I'll get up, just to show you.”

And he is exerting his will and scrambling out of bed. . . .

II. Promises

They are seated at the breakfast table, Nona with just a pink kimono over her night-dress.

As he is eating his porridge, he is noticing the buttery edges of the butter dish and the buttery knife left in it as he is remembering it was the night before; the marmalady marmalade dish, with the marmalady spoon resting stickily in the depths of the marmalade itself; the toast rack stuffed with toast and its silver stuck with crumbs that seem to have been in adherence

for days; the silver-topped salt-shaker encrusted with a rim of green discoloration round its nozzle; the fork beside the covered dish of bacon before him with a film of grease between two of its prongs; the dust on the mantelpiece clock and on the empty silver vases and the pair of black marble elephants.

He is wondering what is the cause of the lack of something on the table, and debating whether a vase of flowers or even a fern would not overcome the suggestion of the table having been laid carelessly and in a hurry. But he is seeing the white Persian cat jumping up into Nona's lap and Nona leaving off eating her porridge to stroke it and press its furry body against her. It is purring contentedly and straining forward to the porridge and milk remaining in Nona's plate. Nona is kissing its head and pulling the plate nearer to it.

"Poor Whitey—he hasn't had his breakfast, has he?" she is soothing, as Whitey is standing with his forepaws on the table and lapping the milk in her plate.

"Oh, Nona," Bob is protesting, "you're not going to finish your porridge after the cat, are you?"

"I don't want any more—I've had plenty. He can have the rest."

"Well, shove him down on the floor, for goodness' sake."

"You don't like my Whitey."

"Yes, I do. But I don't see any reason why I should dine at the same table as him. The table's messy enough as it is."

"Well, that's not my fault, darling, and you know it."

"Isn't Mabel any better? Did you speak to her?"

"I'm always speaking to her. I don't like the house in a muddle. But what can I do? Mabel takes no notice of me."

"But you must assert yourself. She must understand that what you say must be done."

"Well, you know what's happened before, when *you've* spoken crossly to the other maids we've had. They've simply packed up their things and left. I don't want to lose Mabel. She's as good as any of the others."

"But—what—what the—what's going to be done?"

"We can't do anything, darling. We just have to bear it."

"Oh, that's rubbish!"—and he is frowning and putting his porridge plate on one side.

"Mabel says that there's too much work in this house for one maid. We ought to have someone to help her if the work is all to be done."

"We can't afford another maid yet."

"I know we can't. I've told Mabel that, numbers of times. But it's no use complaining that Mabel doesn't keep the house nice. It's more than she can

do alone. As I say, we must just put up with it until we can afford to have another maid.”

“If I can get this Speedtype Writer agency, we'll soon have plenty of money.” And he is forking rashers of fried bacon from the dish before him on to a plate, and handing it to Nona. “This Mordril building will bring in a nice little income, too. I'll change the name of it if I buy it—call it the Watson building. And one of the first things when we have some money, we'll have another maid.”

“You mustn't forget what you're saying, Bobbles dear. When you *do* have some more money, don't say that you have to invest it all again.”

“I don't think it will be necessary. It *has* been necessary in the past or I'd never have been able to develop the business. As it is, it's going to be a big strain for me to buy the Mordril building.”

“You don't think it's too big a thing for you to do?”

“Of course not. Wait until all my schemes materialize, then you'll see some real money. You see only figures on paper now—but wait. The real money will come.”

“I hope it does. Everybody thinks we're immensely rich, and all the time we can't afford to have the house tidy.”

“I'll show everybody.”

He is quickly eating his bacon, and the colour is mounting into his cheeks as he is thinking of Nona's remark about “everybody thinks we're immensely rich.” He is feeling eager to get into town and continue his negotiations that will bring him the success he wants. He is feeling that he wants to show everybody that his success is a real, substantial thing, evident in his home as well as his talk. He is feeling that at all costs he must secure this Mordril building and this Speedtype Writer agency.

“Whitey, darling,” he can hear Nona admonishing, “you mustn't put your ickle paws into the bacon fat. You won't like it. Make you all sticky. Whitey, you mustn't do it when I tell you not to.”

III. Intentions

As he is walking along the asphalt pavement from his house towards the Milson's Point steam ferry which will take him from the North Shore to Circular Quay, his mind is going on:

. . . If I get this agency and I buy this building, it's going to be a devil of a big thing. I'll be all tied up for a while. But I'll have a real solid footing. Success. It'll be a real success. Everybody expects so much from me. They think I can't fail. I must be able to show something substantial that I've got. Sole agent for the Speedtype Writer in New South Wales—I can make a

good thing out of it. I'll sell the machine in a big way—establish sub-agencies in every large town, advertise as widely as I dare. In time, if I can show big enough sales, I might form a company to manufacture the Speedtype machines here in Sydney for the Australian market, and pay the American company a royalty. The Speedtype Writer Company (Australia), Ltd., Robert Watson, managing director. I'd want to be able to hold a majority of the shares if I did anything of that kind. If I had the Mordril building then, I could turn it over to the company in consideration of a certain holding of shares. Might ultimately be invited by the American company to visit their factory. Take Nona with me on the trip. H'm. Might invite me to take charge of one of their American plants. Success. "Bob's got on wonderfully, hasn't he?" "Yes, he's very clever." "Very smart." "Capable, alert." "He got on rapidly ever since he quitted the Patent Fence Company." Got chucked out, you mean. They didn't want me. I've got on well ever since. It's always been what I wanted to do—have my own office, my own business. All this that I'm doing now is what I've longed and yearned to do since I was fifteen. Ridiculous it would have been if mother had had her way and I'd gone into father's shop. Simply buried alive. What I wanted I've practically got now. Business in the city. Excitement. Making money. Losing it! But always progress. Always expansion. Bigger and bigger business. Competition. Struggle and pushing. It's life! Anything else is dry rot. Obstacles and difficulties? I like them! They're something to get your teeth into. If you win or you lose, doesn't matter. The thing is, it's all life—live overflowing, superabundant. Blake and Crobe? They're after the Speedtype agency? All the more fun. Very dull just to arrange with Badelaw in a grandmotherly sort of way to sell his Speedtypes for him. It's the sensation of knocking out Blake and Crobe that is food and drink to me. . . .

IV. Efforts

At ten o'clock he is sitting in the swivel chair in front of the roll-top desk in his office. He is twisted round to the telephone on the little table beside his desk, and while his eyes are looking unseeing through the window over the slate and iron roofs and chimney stacks that compose the view, he is saying into the telephone transmitter:

"Is that Masteed and Co., the estate agents? Oh, is that Mr. Masteed? Watson speaking. I got your letter this morning about the Hunter Street building."

"Yes, you see, Mr. Watson, I couldn't place your offer before our client: we'd already submitted him several offers higher than that."

"H'm. I see. Well, I'd like to have this property. How much does the owner want?"

"As much as he can get, Mr. Watson!"

"I understood it was going at a fairly reasonable price."

"That's quite true."

"But my offer's not good enough?"

"We've been offered so much better."

"I see. Well, if I—if I were to make you an offer of, say, twelve thousand. How about that?"

"Still a long way off, Mr. Watson."

"Surely not. It's not worth more than that."

"Other people think it is."

. . . Is he bluffing me? Bob's mind is saying. More than twelve thousand. It's not going so cheaply. . . .

"What's the best offer you've had, Mr. Masteed? Can you tell me that?"

"I'd rather not, on the telephone."

"Just a rough idea. I want this building, and I'm prepared to stretch a point—to a certain extent."

"You'll want to go something higher than sixteen."

"Thousand?"

"That's it."

"Whew! Too much."

"I don't think so. It's a building in a pretty good position."

"But not in first-class repair."

"In moderate repair."

"H'm. Well, I'll have to think about it."

"All right, Mr. Watson."

"Morning."

"Good morning, Mr. Watson."

Click! Bob is slipping the telephone receiver back on to its hook, and twisting round to face his desk. His heart is beating a little faster, and the colour is mounting into his cheeks. He is feeling as though he has walked to the edge of a precipice and that a vast abyss is yawning before him.

. . . More than sixteen thousand! he is thinking, and writing the figure on the corner of his blotting-pad, the three noughts of it very deliberately. I can never stretch to that. Not if I'm going to reserve anything for advertising Speed-type. Can't be done. Whew! . . .

As he is rapidly calculating figures on the blotting pad, the words are coming into his mind:

. . . Overreaching yourself? Trying to stretch too far? Too ambitious? The bank will let me have seven thousand; I can lay my hands on four

thousand of my own if I can sell this boric acid and borax glass for what I paid for them—two thousand, five hundred—that's eleven thousand. I could get a second mortgage of four thousand—that's fifteen thousand. I could raise twelve hundred or so on our house—that's sixteen thousand, two hundred. But then I've nothing to spend on fitting out the Mordril building if it's going to be a good investment from office lettings. And there isn't a penny for advertising Speedtype. . . .

He is leaning back and making the chair squeak on its spring. His forehead is wrinkled, and he is twirling round his pencil between his fingers.

. . . Attempting too much? his mind is suggesting to him. Going beyond yourself? Exaggerating your powers? . . .

He is feeling that the Mordril building is retreating from him when it seemed almost in his grasp. He has made a grab at it, but it has eluded him. He has thought it was quite a little affair, but on close inspection it has turned out to be gigantic. He is feeling himself very small beside his new conception of the Mordril building. He is feeling that he has been just a little humiliated.

His eyes are wandering over to the other side of the office, where Miss Delaine is typing out accounts. She is looking very efficient as she is typing away—click-clack-clock-clack-click-clock!—on the Remington machine, her face turning now to the ledger beside her, now to the slip of paper in the typewriter. She is conveying to him the impression that the business of the office is going on, on, on, that work is being accomplished, progress being made. He is feeling the impression reassuring.

Her mass of fair hair, her blue eyes, her long eyelashes, her colourful cheeks, her pretty little lips, cherry red, the deep opening in her blouse and the clear tender skin of her breast through it.

He is indrawing a long breath and exhaling it very slowly as he is looking round again at the pigeon holes in his desk. In his mind he can still see the attractive figure of Miss Delaine. The glimpse of her breast through the deep opening in her blouse is making him feel he wants her, and the suppression of this hunger in him is causing him to feel new life in himself. It is as though something has expanded in his chest. His control of the urge towards Miss Delaine is giving him a feeling of renewed self-confidence, of greater clearness in his head, of fresh energy all over him. The clack-clock-clock-clack-click-clock! of the Remington, reminding him of the solidity and reality of the business of Robert Watson, broker and importer, is helping him to look at the problem of the Mordril building again.

. . . I'm counting on only seven thousand from the bank, the words are in his mind. Why not ask for more? If the Mordril building is worth more

than sixteen thousand to other people, it ought to be worth it to me. . . .

At half-past ten he is in the manager's office at the bank, and the manager is telling him that he will make further inquiries about letting him have an advance of more than £7,000.

At eleven o'clock he is with Mr. Badelaw in Mr. Badelaw's room at the Hotel Australia.

"It's this way, Mr. Watson," Mr. Badelaw is saying opulently, turning his face away from Bob as he is slowly tapping ash from the end of his cigar into the tray on the table at which he is seated. "There are other firms who want to handle Speedtype. What I've got to decide is which of them is going to put the machine over to the best advantage."

"Quite so. I appreciate that."

"One firm has already offered me better terms of sale than I was at first prepared to accept."

"I think I know the firm you mean."

"Yes, well, I can have Speedtype launched in New South Wales by them and they'll be satisfied with a discount of less than I offered them."

"How much?"

"Forty."

"I'll handle it at thirty-three and a third per cent."

"Oh. Why, that's a consideration." And Mr. Badelaw is taking a long draw at his cigar and again tapping ash from the end of it.

"I hope before long, too, to be able to tell you I've taken premises in a good street, so that Speedtype will be well displayed."

"That counts for a lot, naturally, when I'm summing things up," Mr. Badelaw is saying, his little dark brown eyes shifting rapidly from point to point of Bob's face and figure. "Now, I'm bound to consult with my other applicants for the agency before I close definitely with you. I can't give you anything certain now, but I'll telephone you later." . . .

At half-past eleven he is trying to sell commercial boric acid powder for which he has paid £33 10s. a ton, and lump borax glass, which he has bought at £52 a ton. But his best offers are £31 for the one and £47 15s. for the other.

. . . No damned good selling at that price, he is thinking as he is walking back to his office. . . .

He is feeling tired as he is re-entering it at half-past twelve to find Miss Delaine conversing with another girl. He is feeling irritable at the sight of Miss Delaine wasting time in this way and the repression of his instinct of wanting to fondle her is contributing to the curtness of his saying, "You've finished those accounts, have you, Miss Delaine?"

"Very nearly, Mr. Watson," she is explaining, and hurriedly bidding

good-bye to her friend. There is the sound of clack-clock-click-clock-clack clock! again in his ears as he is sitting at his desk.

. . . Blake and Crobe won't come lower than thirty-three and a third, he is thinking, and a smile is growing on his lips and he is experiencing a warmer feeling round the region of his heart as his mind is filled with a golden picture of himself as sole agent for the Speedtype Writer. . . .

. . . If I can only get hold of this Mordril building, he is going on to reflect. . . .

Feeling cheerful, he is standing up and walking over to the telephone beside the window. With the instrument in one hand, he is sitting in a carefree attitude on the broad window-sill and pulling at his trouser leg with the other hand to ease the pressure of the cloth at the knees, and gazing out at the vista of rooftops through the window pane. As he is asking the telephone exchange for the number of the bank, he is wondering whether Miss Delaine is noticing the gay design on his socks, amply visible with his trouser legs eased up above his ankles.

Now he is connected through to the bank manager, and is asking,
"Did you come to a decision about that business of mine, Mr. Sleem?"

"Yes, I've gone thoroughly into that, Mr Watson."

"Well, what about it?"

"We can let you have something more."

"Then I'll come round to you at once."

"All right."

He is feeling quite confident and buoyant as he is thumping down the telephone on its little table, striding across the office floor, taking his hat from the hook behind the door, and saying to Miss Delaine,

"I shan't be back until after lunch, Miss Delaine."

The telephone bell is ringing and he is striding back to it, throwing his hat on to the blotting paper on his desk. He is feeling full of life and gaiety as he is calling loudly and extravagantly into the telephone transmitter,
"Hallo, hallo, hallo, hallo!"

"Mr. Badelaw of Speedtype this end," a quiet voice is coming through the receiver.

"Watson speaking. What is it, Mr. Badelaw?"

"About your offer to take thirty-three and a third."

"Yes, Mr. Badelaw."

"You remember my firm's original offer in connection with this agency included a proviso that we should spend a certain sum over the first year on national advertising."

"Quite so. I remember the amount."

"I thought I'd better let you know the position up to date. My other

applicant for the agency is prepared to handle the machine without our guarantee to spend an amount on national advertising.”

“Oh, I see. H'm.”

“What is more, this other firm will spend half the sum I mentioned to you on advertising on their own behalf.”

“Oh! . . . But they're doing this on a basis of discount at forty per cent. discount, remember, Mr. Badelaw.”

“No, they've come down to your offer of thirty-three and a third.”

“I see.”

“I must close with them unless you can suggest better terms, Mr. Watson.”

“Oh, naturally.”

His mind is filled with the figures “33 1/8,” “£5,000,” “£2,500.”

“I'd be glad if you could let me know some time this afternoon at latest, Mr. Watson, what is your final suggestion. I must conclude an arrangement as soon as ever I can, and get down to Melbourne.”

“I understand, Mr. Badelaw.” But his heart is thumping hard, and he is trying to make up his mind whether he should take a plunge.

“I'll hear from you later, then, Mr. Watson?”

“You know, Mr. Badelaw, I should be prepared to take delivery of from five to ten thousand machines a year.”

“Could you guarantee to take a certain number?”

“I think that could be arranged. Say seven thousand.”

“I see.”

“And I wouldn't stick at the proviso that you spend so much on national advertising.”

“I get you, Mr. Watson.”

“And for that matter, I wouldn't take on the proposition at all if I were not prepared myself to spend a fairly large sum on publicity.”

“Well, if you can satisfy me on these points——”

“I'm sure I can do that.”

“Very well. See me at four o'clock, will you?”

“I will, Mr. Badelaw, thank you.”

“Good-bye.”

“Good-bye, Mr. Badelaw.”

. . . Am I going too far? the suggestion is in his mind; and he is swallowing a lump in his throat as he is putting down the telephone, quietly resuming his hat, and walking out of the office door. . . .

V. Cross-Currents

At a quarter past one he is sitting with Harold, Judith's husband, at a table in the crowded restaurant at the Civil Service Stores. They are waiting for their orders to be brought, and amid the loud hum of conversation all round them, Bob is leaning with his arms crossed over the white table-cloth and looking into Harold's big rubicund face and his twinkling bright eyes, and saying,

“You see, I went round to see Sleem, the manager of the bank, after he telephoned me, and asked him just how much he'd decided I could have. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘say five hundred above what I told you before.’ ‘Is that all?’ I said. ‘I don't see how we can go further,’ he said. ‘Surely you can,’ I said. I said, ‘I explained to you all that I wanted it for. It's a perfectly sound proposition.’ ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I know.’ ‘Surely, Mr. Sleem——’ I said. ‘Well’, he said, ‘if I say another two hundred and fifty——’ ‘Make it an additional thousand altogether,’ I said. ‘That'll make a total advance of eight thousand.’ I said. I said, ‘I explained to you all that I wanted it for. It's a perfectly sound proposition.’ ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I know.’ ‘Surely, Mr. Sleem——’ I said. ‘Well’, he said, ‘if I say another two hundred and fifty——’ ‘Make it an additional thousand altogether,’ he said, ‘I know.’ ‘Surely, Mr. Sleem——’ I said. ‘Well’, he said, ‘if I say another two hundred and fifty——’ ‘Make it an additional thousand altogether,’ I said. ‘That'll make a total advance of eight thousand.’ I said. I said, ‘I explained to you all that I wanted it for. It's a perfectly sound proposition.’ ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I know.’ ‘Surely, Mr. Sleem——’ I said. ‘Well’, he said, ‘if I say another two hundred and fifty——’ he said, ‘I know.’ ‘Surely, Mr. Sleem——’ I said. ‘Well’, he said, ‘if I say another two hundred and fifty——’ ‘Make it an additional thousand altogether,’ he said, ‘I know.’ ‘Surely, Mr. Sleem——’ I said. ‘Well’, he said, ‘if I say another two hundred and fifty——’ ‘Make it an additional thousand altogether,’ I said. ‘That'll make a total advance of eight thousand.’ I said. I said, ‘I explained to you all that I wanted it for. It's a perfectly sound proposition.’ ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I know.’ ‘Surely, Mr. Sleem——’ I said. ‘Well’, he said, ‘if I say another two hundred and fifty——’ he said, ‘I know.’ ‘Surely, Mr. Sleem——’ I said. ‘Well’, he said, ‘if I say another two hundred and fifty——’ ‘Make it an additional thousand altogether,’ he said, ‘I know.’ ‘Surely, Mr. Sleem——’ I said. ‘Well’, he said, ‘if I say another two hundred and fifty——’ ‘Make it an additional thousand altogether,’ I said. ‘That'll make a total advance of eight thousand.’ he said, ‘I know.’ ‘Surely, Mr. Sleem——’ I said. ‘Well’, he said, ‘if I say another two hundred and fifty——’ ‘Make it an additional thousand altogether,’ I said. ‘That'll make a total advance of eight thousand.’ But there was nothing doing. And, in any case, eight thousand isn't enough. I thought they might have let me

have nine or ten thousand. But Sleem would go no further than a total of seven thousand seven hundred and fifty.”

“What are you going to do?” Harold is asking.

“What *can* I do? I'd like to know who it is that's offering sixteen thousand for the Mordril building.”

“I know one firm besides yourself that's after it.”

“Who?”

“Blake and Crobe.”

“Is that a fact?”

“That's what I've been told. And since Crobe is a nephew of old Sleem, your bank manager, you can see how it is that Sleem won't advance you much. He's not going to back you to beat his nephew.”

“My God! I never thought of that.”

“It takes a wise man to know all the currents and cross-currents swirling and eddying round his business life, Bob.”

“I'd like to go back to old Sleem and tell him I know what he's doing. But, of course, that would get me nowhere.”

“No. This is all part of business. It's what you've got to put up with.” . . .

At ten to two, as he is parting with Harold at the crowded noisy corner of Pitt and King Streets, he is asking, “How's Judith?”

“Pretty well,” Harold is saying. “Much about the same.”

“And mother?”

“She seems all right. She's staying with us only three weeks altogether, you know, then she's going to stay with you.”

“I expect the house is looking fine now with the new dining room suite and all the rest of it.”

“Yes, it's quite nice.”

“Are you all straight again?”

“More or less, I think. It's about time, too. For five solid weeks, the whole place has been in a muddle.”

“Judith's papered all the rooms herself, I believe?”

“Yes, every one of them. She's worked like fury. Wouldn't give herself a moment's rest.”

“I hope she doesn't overtire herself. You ought to stop her from doing too much.”

“Stop her? She'd hit me with something if I tried to stop her. She's dreadfully irritable nowadays. She can't bear for a thing in the house to be out of place. Everything must be exactly and precisely right—to three places of decimal! The sight of a speck of dust makes her see red.”

“Ah, Harold, you've got a lot to be thankful for. You've got a very nice house.”

“Yes, there's nothing wrong with the house.”

“You should see the way ours gets. It's never tidy, and it never seems to be clean.”

Harold does not seem to wish to prolong the conversation. “Well, I must go now, Bob,” he is saying. “So long, old chap!”

“So long, Harold!”

Bob is walking on through the lunch-hour crowds on the pavement of Pitt Street, towards his office.

. . . Poor Harold! the words are in his mind. He's not happy. There's something upsetting him. Never so cheerful as he used to be . . .

At the corner of Martin Place he is recognizing the face of a man walking in the opposite direction. The short figure, the dark hair, the dark, thick eyebrows meeting above his nose—Mr. Blake, of Blake and Crobe.

Blake is apparently not seeing him, but Bob is feeling an irresistible urge to stop him and speak to him.

“Well——!” he is saying as he is putting his hand on Blake's arm.

“Hallo! Hallo! Watson!”

Bob is feeling that Blake would rather not have stopped.

“How's the world treating you?” Blake is adding.

“Pretty well, thanks. But I'd be happier if some people didn't try so much to undercut me.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know. You know jolly well.” And Bob is smiling at him. He is feeling that in any case he has his competitor beaten.

“Honestly, I don't. I haven't the least idea what you're talking about. What's your trouble?”

“Oh, no trouble. It's not that. But don't say you don't know what I mean when I speak of people undercutting me.”

“But I don't know.” Blake is looking at him quizzically.

“Don't know about Speedtype?”

“What about Speedtype?”

“You know I'm after the agency, don't you?”

“Well—yes—I suppose I do.”

“It's between the two of us.”

“I believe it is, really.”

“Well?”

“Well, what?”

“That's where the undercutting comes in.”

“I'm not undercutting anyone.”

“Aren't you offering to take Speedtype at thirty-three and a third discount?”

“Never!”

“And waiving a national advertising appropriation?”

“Of course not!”

“Well, I don't understand.”

“Neither do I, Watson.”

“You mean to say you didn't come down on Badelaw's terms?”

“No. Nothing of the kind. If you ask me if we're after the Speedtype agency, I'll tell you frankly we are. And I'll tell you this, too, there's only my firm and yourself in the running for it. But when I say I'd like the agency, it's not on bare-bone terms. If we can have Speedtype at the terms Badelaw offered—fifty per cent. discount, and his people spend five thousand the first year on national publicity, then I'm all for it. But it's no earthly use to me at anything less. What's more I wouldn't dream of suggesting to Badelaw that I'd handle his proposition at anything lower than what he's offered. The Speedtype machines are not so wonderful as all that.”

“H'm. Well, of course——” And Bob is feeling confused at what Mr. Blake has said.

“They're very complicated machines, the Speedtypes. It's doubtful if they'll stand up to much hard racket. Whoever sells them will have to be prepared to do a lot of repairs free of charge. That's what I think about Speedtypes. If you're so frightfully keen about the agency, *I* won't oppose you.”

Bob is nodding his head. He is feeling that he doesn't know just what to say.

“I expect you're pretty busy, Blake,” he is muttering, and shaking him by the hand. “I'll not keep you. I'm busy myself. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye, Watson.”

Bob is biting his lips and his forehead is puckered as he is striding along the pavement again. His hands are pushed hard into his trousers pockets, and a growing feeling of anger is possessing him.

. . . Damn that man Badelaw, his mind is going on. I never felt too sure about him from the first. He's bluff—every inch of him. He's been stringing me on. Screwing me down to the limit, to see the lowest terms I *will* submit to, under pressure. He's thought I was a bone-head, and he's gone after me. He's seen I was keen on taking on this Speedtype agency, and he's taken advantage of me. The whole thing's bluff. Made me imagine all the time that Blake and Crobe were bidding against me for the agency, so that I'd bid one better. Pure bluff. Anyhow, if that's the sort of man Badelaw is, I'll fight him on his own ground. I'll not be beaten by that kind of fellow. . . .

At half-past two he is sitting in his chair before his office desk and

telephoning to Mr. Badelaw. His face is serious and he is feeling very much in earnest as he is saying into the instrument, "Mr. Badelaw, about Speedtype."

"Yes, Mr. Watson."

"I've been thinking a good deal about what I proposed to you this morning."

"Why, yes. Go ahead."

"On going more thoroughly into the subject of my handling Speedtypes, I find that—well, I'm afraid I must apologise to you for what I said. I find I could not possibly enter into a definite agreement with you on the lines I suggested this morning."

"No?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't do it. It wouldn't be wise of me. I can only say I'm terribly sorry if I have put you to any inconvenience by my suggesting terms to you and not being able to stand by them."

"Why, if that's the position, Mr. Watson——"

"It's obvious to me now that it wouldn't be worth anybody's while to handle your machine at so low a discount as thirty-three and a third. There are so many things to be considered. You must remember that your machine is very complicated, Mr. Badelaw, and that any firm handling it will have to be prepared to execute a great many repairs under the twelve months' guarantee given to every purchaser. A lot must be allowed for that."

"I never heard that point raised before, Mr. Watson. It hasn't been our experience in the United States that our machine is unreliable."

"No, well, I must allow for it, Mr. Badelaw."

"Very good, then——"

"And then there's the point about national publicity. I realise now that it is going to take an enormous push at first to start sales of this machine to any great extent."

"We recognise the need of a substantial sales campaign at the outset, Mr. Watson. My firm is quite prepared to spend the sum I spoke about before, over the first twelve months."

"I remember that."

"But when, as I told you, my other applicants for the agency signified their willingness for us to withhold that publicity money, why——"

"Yes, well, I'm not prepared to go so far as that."

"Is that absolutely final?"

"Absolutely final, Mr. Badelaw. What is more, I don't think I would be able to give you a contract for a definite number of machines. I think I mentioned that I might be able to pledge myself to take seven thousand

machines a year for a certain time. I'm afraid I couldn't give you that in writing. It would not be worth my while."

"You've quite made up your mind about that?"

"Yes, that's my final word. If I am to have the agency, it will be on these terms: forty per cent. discount, your firm to allot five thousand for national publicity. You offered fifty per cent. discount, Mr. Badelaw, and I'm prepared to take the machine at forty. Beyond that I can't go."

"You understand that I have already been offered better terms than yours, Mr. Watson? That's quite clear to you?"

"I know *all about that*, Mr. Badelaw."

"Very well, Mr. Watson, thank you."

"Good-bye."

Bob is smiling as he is jamming down the telephone with a thud on its little table. He is rubbing his hands with satisfaction, then suddenly ceasing to rub his hands on becoming conscious of Miss Delaine watching him.

. . . I've as good as got the agency, the words are in his mind. Blake and Crobe won't come below fifty per cent., and I'll take the business at forty. Badelaw must accept my offer. All his other talk is piffle. I've practically got the agency on wonderful terms, and I'm not going to budge an inch . . .

He is standing up and walking over to the window, where he is standing gazing out over the roof tops, his hands in his trousers pockets.

. . . But I still haven't got the Mordril building, his thoughts are going on. I don't want to be beaten on that. If the Speedtype people spend their five thousand pounds on national advertising, that frees me from spending just that much of my own money. I might concentrate myself more on travellers working on commission. H'm. Let us say, eight thousand from the bank, four thousand of my own if I sell this boric acid and borax glass, there's twelve thousand. A thousand I could raise on our house, that's thirteen thousand. A second mortgage of four thousand on the Mordril building will bring me to seventeen thousand. It's a damned tight squeeze. And if Blake and Crobe are after this building as well as the Speedtype agency, and if Crobe is a nephew of Sleem, the bank manager, and has Sleem backing him up for all he's worth——? What the dickens am I to do? If I make an offer above sixteen thousand for the Mordril building, the strain will almost break me. I'll have scarcely enough to carry on with for several months—for rent and salary and all the rest of it. And yet I want to own a place. And it'd be madness to let this pass. Property is bound to increase in value. If I can only scrape together the money now to buy it—I'll be repaid over and over again. But it's going to be a close go. And I'm that damned tired to-day, somehow. I can't think clearly. Don't seem able to make up my mind. Nona noticed this morning that I looked tired. I feel

worn to a frazzle. If I could bring off this business successfully, it would set me up again. The whole thing's beginning to get on my nerves. I'm tied down—for money. If I had more capital, I'd sweep everything before me. To think of that damned little fellow Crobe being a nephew of Sleem—no wonder Sleem is stingy with me. And to think that Badelaw would try to bluff me the way he did. Enough to make you feel sick. I'm nervy to-day. All on edge. It's that typewriter—clickity—clack—clock—clackity-click! I wish the girl would give it a rest. And what a rotten view through this window! Rusty iron roofs, dirty slate roofs, blackened, grimy chimneys—dusty, dirty, depressing outlook it is. Give you the pip if you looked at it long. What on earth am I to do about this Mordril building? Haven't I the courage to make another bid for it? That's because I'm tired. I'd give anything for a shift out of this rotten little office and this rotten, gloomy view through the window. It'll be a cruel shame if the Mordril building goes by me just because I'm short of a thousand or so. It just happens that I'm wanting to do so many things at once. But I can't help it. Things have come round this way. And I've got to make up my mind. In the meantime I haven't sold this stuff—boric acid and borax glass—and there are tons of it. If I sell now I must drop a lot of money on it. If I don't sell, the Mordril building will slip by me, because I'm reckoning on the sale of these chemicals. Offer Masteed sixteen thousand five hundred for the Mordril building. Take a plunge. It's worth much more than that. And I'll have another try to get rid of this boric acid and borax glass. . . .

Between three and four o'clock he is making his offer to Mr. Masteed and consulting more firms about boric acid and borax glass. For the chemicals he is receiving lower price offers than before, and he is not feeling happy when at a quarter-past four he is returning to his office. He is feeling more nervy than before, and there is a worried expression on his face as he is opening his office door.

“Mr. Badelaw has been telephoning, Mr. Watson,” Miss Delaine is looking up at him to say.

“Thanks. I'll get on to him.”

His walk is a little brisker as he is crossing the linoleum floor. As he is picking up the telephone and asking for the number of the Hotel Australia, his heart is thumping.

. . . It's about Speedtype, the words are coming into his mind. I've got the agency. He's been ringing up to tell me. By God! Oh, God! The one bright spot to-day. Thank God! Thank God! . . .

“Hallo! I want Mr. Badelaw, please . . . Is that Mr. Badelaw? Watson here. You telephoned to me. Sorry I was out.”

“Oh, sure. It was just to tell you, Mr. Watson, that I've concluded the

business about the Speed-type agency.”

“Yes?”

“I've just signed an agreement quarter of an hour ago.”

“Oh!”

“I thought I'd tell you, so you'd know how things stand, that's all. Much obliged to you for the offer you made.”

“You mean—er——”

“Thanks very much. Good-bye.”

“Just a moment. You've made over the agency to somebody else?”

“Sure thing, Mr. Watson.”

“Do you mind telling me who is to have the agency?”

“No, there's no secret. The agreement I signed was with Messrs. Blake and Crobe.” . . .

As he is setting down the telephone on its little table and standing and staring with wrinkled forehead across the vista of roofs, Bob is feeling perplexed as much as worried.

. . . The silly fool—given Speedtype to—to Blake and—and Crobe—when Blake and Crobe wouldn't come below fifty per cent. discount, and I offered to take forty? Given the agency to—to——? What the blazes——? . . .

The telephone's ringing is in his ears, and he is lifting up the instrument and calling tiredly into it, “Hallo!”

“That you, Bob? Harold speaking.”

“Yes, Harold.”

“I hear you didn't get the Speedtype agency, after all.”

“No.”

“How's that?”

“Bothered if I know. B. and C. have got it.”

“So I've just learnt.”

“What terms did you offer?”

“Forty per cent.”

“Then no wonder you lost the business. B. and C. took the agency at thirty-three and a third, and they're waiving the national advertising clause, they're guaranteeing to spend so much on advertising of their own, and they're pledging themselves to take a certain number of machines for a number of years.”

“All nonsense, Harold! You're talking through your hat.”

“No, I had this from Crobe himself.”

“Blake told me he wouldn't come a point below what Badelaw originally offered. You know what that was. I'd already offered Badelaw the terms that B. and C. have agreed to. But I thought Badelaw was only bluffing me

when he told me what he'd been offered; I rang him up and told him I couldn't come below forty per cent. discount. There's been some damned roguery somewhere."

"My boy! My boy! You've been bluffed! But it's not Badelaw: it's *Blake who's bluffed you!*"..

Ten minutes later it is Mr. Masteed who is telling him through the telephone,

"I'm afraid your offer for the Hunter Street property still won't do, Mr. Watson. My other clients have increased their figure. Can you make me any better proposal?"

"I made you my highest bid, Mr. Masteed."

"And that's final?"

"I can't offer a penny more."

"Then I fear you're out of the running."

VI. Depths

He is sitting before his desk, with his elbows on the blotting pad and his cheeks resting in his hands. He is feeling as though he has been beaten across the back—as though he has been flogged desperately with a whip. He is swallowing something in his throat and frowning hard at the glass inkwell, its mouth black with ink dried to a crust. In his mind the words are coming:

. . . "It's Blake who's bluffed you." Made a fool of me. Tossed me up in the air and laughed at me as I've come down with an almighty thud. Blake will be laughing with Crobe over it now. Crobe, who's had old Sleem, the bank manager, at his beck and call. It's all a lot of scheming and bluffing and fighting and struggling. Lies and craft and deceit and unfairness. Makes me sick and tired to think of it all. I've been schemed against and plotted against, and pitched out on my head. I feel as if I'd been turned inside out and thoroughly trounced. I'm tired and worn and sick to death of the whole thing. And if Miss Delaine doesn't stop that rattle of her typewriter, I'll go mad. I can't stand the damned wretched thing. Clock-clock-click-clock-clack-clock!—rattle, bang, whiz, thump!—noise, noise, noise! Gives me a confounded headache. Oh, shut up, girl. For the love of God, be quiet. I'm all unstrung. Tired—tired out. Rotten. Worn to a shred. A cup of tea—that'd do me good. No use trying to do anything more to-day. Too tired, anyhow. Go out somewhere and have a cup of tea, then go home. What's the time? Getting on for half-past four. I'll go now. . . .

"Don't wait, Miss Delaine," he is saying as he is putting on his overcoat and hat and walking out of the door—"if I'm not back at five o'clock. I'll be

back soon after and I'll lock up.”

“Very well, sir.”

Descending to the ground floor in the lift, he is feeling regret that there should be such a cold barrier of propriety between Miss Delaine and himself that should cause her to address him as “sir.” Bemusingly he is picturing her being very warm towards him and calling him “darling Bob.” As he is walking along the tiled floor of the entrance lobby of the building, he is rejecting this mental picture from his mind.

Down the trachyte stone steps, and now he is threading his way through the crowds of people—mostly men and errand boys—on the pavement.

. . . Go to Sargent's in George Street, he is deciding. Music there. Jolly cold wind sprung up. Tears right through you. Like a knife. I'm all of a tremble. Don't know whether it's the cold or my nerves. I feel shaken to pieces. Blown to atoms. Business, eh! The business world. It's a stormy sea. My God! it's a raging, tearing place. Woo! Or like a jungle. Look out, or they'll tear you to bits. They'll snatch at you and maul you and snap bloody junks of flesh off you. Fiendish, snarling, roaring, shrieking place it is—business world. Fighting and struggling all the time. I've been knocked about, banged about, walloped and basted and thrashed. I'm tired and weary. . . .

Across the bleak, windy rectangle of Martin Place, the tall mass of the General Post-Office on his left, and its fat marble pillars flanking its colonnade.

. . . Round every corner, they're waiting for you. Grinning at you. They'll grab you some day. They'll net you in their snares. They'll have you snapped up between their teeth—they'll fasten their great sharp fangs in you. They'll hold you tight as a vice and worry at you and fling you about and snivel all the life out of you. A wild, tearing, raging world. . . .

Into George Street, and holding his hat on in the wind whistling round the corner of the post-office. The noise of the George Street electric trams and the motor-cars and lorries and the people on the pavement and crossing the street and ascending and descending the tiers of steps along the post-office building. Past John Sands' stationery shop, and into the electrically lit interior of Sargent's. The roaring and banging of the street traffic melting away as he is walking across the floor and the strains of the orchestra from its perch up in the musicians' gallery coming to his ears.

. . . Rachmaninoff's Prelude, he is divining the melody, as he is sitting at one of the round marble-topped tables along the wall. . . .

He is asking a waitress for tea and cakes and leaning back tiredly in his chair. He is feeling that he is still too nervilly cold to pull off his overcoat.

The turgid vibration of the strings of the 'cello and the double-bass

preponderating over the treble of the violin and the piano. He is feeling that the trembling catgut of the double-bass is sending a sensation of quivering thrill all over his skin. The deep chords of the Prelude are bringing suggestions to his mind of melancholy and darkness and striving against darkness.

The waitress is clattering the plate and cup and saucer, the knife and fork and spoon, the tea-pot with its spout steaming, the jug of milk, the plate of cakes, from her tray to the marble of the table. He is feeling that the marble looks cold. He is sighing as he is pouring out tea.

The last long chord of the Prelude is dying away, and the drone of conversation from around the tables and the clatter of crockery being handled from the waitresses' buffet at the end of the big room, are assuming the place of the music.

With the tea warming him and while he is eating cake, his mind is going on:

. . . Oh, it isn't just because I've had a run of bad luck to-day that I feel like this. I'm not outed from business just because things have gone against me. I still have resources to go on with. I've just come to a dead-end, and I'm tired and altogether rotten. Struggle and fight and scheme and lie—I'm sick of it. I've been sick of it for ages really; but I've been carrying on, carrying on. Oh, I know I talk to myself about liking obstacles and struggling and knocking out other people—but, lord!—we're like savage beasts—dingoes, panthers, wolves—snarling, growling—plotting against one another. Whole thing makes me feel miserable. When I'm full of energy I think differently about it all—I think of the glory of bashing one another about. But that's only the physical part of me. I'm conscious of what I sincerely feel about it when I'm like I am now—wary. It's fighting, fighting for yourself all day and every day—day after day. Selfish, mean, greedy, narrow, paltry, contemptible—it's all that. Ah—ah dear! Whenever was there any satisfaction in fighting for yourself? Oh, I know you must do something in life. Make a living, and all the rest of it. The way I go about and the way I talk—even the things I say to myself—you'd think it was my soul's delight to be banging around in business. It's quite true—it's what I've always wanted to do since I was a kid—be a business man. Yet there's never been a time in my life when I wouldn't rather do nothing than strain myself pushing on carving a career. But it's no use thinking about doing nothing—you've got to do something; and in the circumstances of having to do something, I wanted to be what I am—a business man. Even so, I didn't see all through city life, and I didn't know I'd feel so rotten about it some day like I'm feeling now. Striving, battling—wrestle and combat—oh, my God! it's all hateful. And it's wrong. . . .

The delicate symphony of the first part of Grieg's Peer Gynt Suite from the orchestra is playing into his ears, and the heavy vibrations of the double-bass are suggesting to him a current flowing deep down in the waters of the stream of life. There is a feeling in him that this current is not apparent on the surface of the stream but that its motion is steady, even, and strong—deep, deep down. His mind is indistinctly taking up the idea of the notes from the piano and the violin being the bubble and froth, the eddy and the back-water of life, but that below their melody there is going on and on the sombre, low harmony of the bass and the violoncello.

He is meditatively eating cake, and the words are coming into his mind:

. . . What is there in life, anyway?—worth while?—that's really worth bothering a moment about? Here I am a business man, and fairly successful up to now, too. On the surface I've liked my work, and I've been satisfied. But right down at the bottom of me—what have I cared for it? At any time, I could have probed deep down into myself and discovered that all my schemes and my running back and forth and winning and losing and accumulating money didn't matter tuppence to me. And if the thing that's most to me on the surface hasn't interested the depths in me, what has? What *has* interested those depths? . . .

He is drinking more tea, and is looking at the numbers of men and women eating at the little round marble-topped tables dotted about the big room.

. . . Does everybody feel like this? he is thinking. Is everybody just going about, carrying on—living—just because it's the only thing to do? If you burrowed down to the very core of each one's heart, would you find that truly, truly they didn't care? If it was possible to leave this life whenever you wanted to, painlessly, blissfully, causing no pang to anyone left behind—is there anything in life that would tempt anyone to stay? The great things that lure us on—success, fame, money—would anyone bother about them if he could have the choice of not entering into this life at all? . . .

But neither the music nor the chattering voices is suggesting an answer.

. . . What *is* the end and aim of life? his mind is going on. What is it the intention of the great and high God that life should be? Is life, considered as Life, just battling on in business?—battling and struggling for yourself? Is that all life is in its perfection? Is that the greatest thing life offers? Is that what it is intended it should be? Is the great Creator of the world satisfied to have things going on and on—just like this? Is this the whole thing when it's finished? Is there nothing better? Nothing greater? . . .

The music has stopped and again the only sounds in his ears are the hum and whisp of voices around the tables—the crack of plates and dishes

being handled, and the ring of spoons in saucers, from the serving buffet at the end of the room.

VII. Shadow

It is dusk now that he is leaving Sargent's and walking amid the crowds on the pavement of George Street again. The clamour of the traffic is once more in his ears. He is noticing that the tramcars are lit up, and that the lamps are lit in the shops and under the shop verandas. He is feeling that the interiors of the trams and of the shops look warm and cosy from the yellow radiance of their electric bulbs.

Round the bleak corner of the post-office into Martin Place, across the windy spaces of the thoroughfare and into Pitt Street, and down the Pitt Street pavement towards his office. The day is quickly fading, and the tall electric street lamps are suddenly every one alight, yellow globe beyond yellow globe as far as the eye can see.

He is threading his way through the increasing numbers of overcoated people on the pavement, and his mind is taking in the familiar inscriptions on the brass plates outside office buildings, the names of insurance companies, brokers, solicitors, financiers, estate agents, printed in gold and black on the office window, and he is conscious of the multiplicity of life which these names denote and the activities of the human lives they employ, the hopes and regrets, the fears and satisfactions, the efforts and the strivings. But his thought in response to these phenomena is the word repeated:

. . . Stale!—stale!—stale!— . . .

In a little while he is going on to think:

. . . Well, think of anything at all, even what we call amusements. You go to a theatre, and you enjoy yourself in a way; you pass the time; you're satisfied; it's all right; but—but—it doesn't touch any deep *joy* in you. It's all right—quite all right—and yet—is that all there is?—just feeling that a thing's “all right,” and just feeling satisfied? You go about and play games and laugh and talk and have fun and you say you've enjoyed yourself or you've had a good time, and all that. But—but—yes, it's all right—but— isn't there something —something—deeper? Life's all right—I've had as much good luck as bad luck—I've no complaints in the ordinary way—and yet—oh, it's all right—but, oh my God!—isn't there something better— *better*—somehow better, deeper, more profound, more *real*?—something that will stir the very core of your being? Is life just surface things, things that leave you just amused, mildly interested, entertained, beguiled? Is there nothing else? Nothing beyond these things? Nothing deeper down? Is

the whole great world, mysterious and wonderful, terrific in its bigness, just for the things that help us to pass the time? Is the greatest joy, the greatest, intensest satisfaction that the great world can give just the feeling of things being “all right”? Oh God! Oh God! . . .

He is feeling he wants something that will lift him fiercely out of himself—something lively, intense—passionate. His mind is drifting to the face of Miss Delaine, and he is feeling how desirable the prettily formed body of Miss Delaine is to him.

. . . “Miss Delaine,” his mind is picturing himself saying, “need we be so—so *frigid*—towards each other? We're like a couple of icebergs drifting close together. And we ought to be like two fires. Vera, dear, I love you, little girley mine. I want to kiss you, dearest. You dear, sweet girl. Why shouldn't we always be more friendly towards one another? Why can't I always kiss you when I want to? Where can the wrong be in that?” . . .

He is imagining himself clasping Miss Delaine's body to him, crushing her fiercely against himself, loving her with intensity, kissing her lips with passion.

. . . “Vera, I love you!” . . .

He is nearing the building which contains his office. The tall entrance and the wide stone steps leading from the lobby to the pavement. Many men walking out of the lobby and down the steps, smoking, talking, laughing. A girl emerging from the building—Miss Delaine. A young man is walking forward from where he has been waiting on the kerb, is raising his hat, Miss Delaine is smiling, and together they are walking down the street.

VIII. Mysterious

He is trying to deny to himself as he is entering the building and ascending to the third floor in the lift, that he is feeling cheated. In his office, he is closing the door behind him and leaning with his back against it, putting up his hand to the wall, and switching on the electric light.

He is looking at Miss Delaine's desk to the left of the door, and the adjustable swivel chair against it; the black dust cover concealing her typewriter; the oak filing cabinet; the table with the chair against it; the window; the telephone; the roll-top desk; the electric radiator; the large calendar on the wall; the row of empty clothes hooks; the arm-chair; the brown linoleum; the rug in the middle of the floor; the mat for Miss Delaine's feet, and the mat for his own.

. . . All dead, he is thinking. Lifeless, motionless. The whole thing's flat. Here I am day after day rushing here and there making use of these dead

things, putting life into them; but what's the use? I'm nearly bursting myself trying to keep the whole thing alive. Why? What does it matter? I hate the sight of it all. Like a corpse. The whole place is a dead weight. Everything that works here works because I'm behind it—pushing it on. It's my energy, my enterprise, my brains, my ideas, my continual shoving. As soon as I stop, the whole thing stops. It's all dead—stone, door-nail dead. . .

He is inhaling a deep breath, lifting himself from against the door, and with his hands in his pockets is walking up and down across the rug in the centre of the floor.

. . . Whatever you try to do, it's struggle, struggle every inch of the way. Whatever you want, you've got to battle for—battle against others who want the same thing, and knock them to Jericho. And what's the good of the things you battle for, anyway? What the blazes do I want with the Mordril building? If I had it, how much happier would I be? I'd be only starting another long struggle to make the building pay back what I spent on it. And if I had the Speedtype agency? In my heart of hearts, what the devil do I want with that confounded thing? Only a lot more battling to get a good sale for the machines. Battle, struggle—for what? If Blake and Crobe want the Speedtype agency so much, for the love of God, let them have it—take it a thousand times over—for all I care. By what stretch of the brain can it be thought that this sort of thing is worth fighting for? If anybody else wants the Mordril building, for God's sake let him take it. I don't want these things one scrap. It's just that you must be enthusiastic about something or you might as well be dead—as dead as these chairs and tables and walls. As dead as those roofs through the window. Yet all the time, these things—these things in business—are *not* worth fighting for. I don't in the bottom of my heart want to be getting the better of anybody or harming any man. There's no satisfaction in that: no joy, nothing deep whatsoever. . . .

Feeling tired out, he is lowering himself into his swivel chair, and sitting, his face gloomy and frowning, his fist under his chin.

. . . There's no object in going on like this, his mind is continuing. You can't throw up everything all of a sudden. You've got to go on living, and you've got to go on working. And yet at the back of it all, there's no purpose—no *basic* purpose. There's an immediate purpose in going on—bread and butter. But why? Yes, I know you've got to eat. But there's something deeper than that. There's still a Why? at the back of it all. . . .

He is leaning back in his chair. He is closing his eyes, and his mind is dimly reaching out for something that will give him satisfaction. He is conscious that in the office there is scarcely a sound. He can hear nothing

where he is at the rear of the building of the banging of the Pitt Street traffic, except the occasional faint and distant roar of a tramcar, and there seems no stir along the passage outside his room from the other occupants of the building.

For a while there is nothing particular in his mind, until gradually he is becoming aware that he is feeling calm. More and more as the minutes are going by this feeling is growing. It is as though he were enveloped in an atmosphere composed wholly of peace. He is feeling that his mind is no longer like a stormy sea, no longer full of thoughts of dissatisfaction, restless, worried. It is as though his mind were suddenly to have broken in upon another world of life—not a life of turbulence, of uncertainty, of yearning, but a world of sureness, of stability, of confidence, of calm, impassioned contentment. Peace—just peace: a slowing down of all the fretfulness in his mind, all the impatience, all the thoughts of dissatisfaction.

Peace. . . .

. . . Somewhere, somehow—the words are coming slowly into his mind—there *is* life that is not like this life. It's all that I feel—this perfect peace. It's there. I know it's there. And somehow—somehow—in that life of peace, there is infinite wisdom. It gives me the feeling that I could solve all the problems of the world—the feeling of being tremendously wise, of having knowledge of vast extent. It isn't that I have so much wisdom or all this knowledge—but somehow there *is* that life—somewhere or other and yet here, right here in this room: and I feel the fringe of it, and it gives me this feeling of what is in it. Peace beyond anything to be imagined possible; and this depth of wisdom. And somehow an extraordinary purity—a purity of spotless white—of shining, glittering white. All there—somehow. And in it all there is love—oh, a thrilling love. Oh, a love that would fold you right up into itself, that would consume you with its burning heat. All there—all there in this life. Not my life—and yet life, as I know what is meant by the word life . . . Oh, Nona! such love! My darling wife, Nona! I haven't been true all through to you. I love you dearly, but I don't think of you all the time. You darling love, I must just be everything to you. You are what I want. You are love. You loving little girl. So full of tenderness. Sweet little child. Miss Delaine—it's not that I want her at all. I'm just mad sometimes. But when I bring myself to think, I know that you are my dear chosen one. For God's sake, forgive me. I haven't been true—in my mind—but I will be true. I owe you everything, my dearest. . . .

He is telephoning to his house, and Nona is answering him.

“I'm leaving the office now, darling,” he is telling her. “I shan't be long before I'm home.”

“All right, Bobbles dear. I'll tell Mabel to have dinner ready in half an hour. Will that do?”

“Of course it will. My sweetest. Good-bye for a little while, loved one.”

“Good-bye, ducky darling.”

They are kissing into the telephone, now they are laughing, and now he is replacing the receiver on its hook.

A few minutes later he is emerging from the office building and mingling with the crowds walking down the pavement of Pitt Street towards Circular Quay. Above the rumble of traffic on the road and the voices of the pedestrians, he is hearing a boyish voice from the kerb, calling,

“*News or Sun—Sun or the Evening News, 'paper! Sun or the News!*”

He is looking towards the youthful owner of the voice and is reading on the placard held like an apron in front of his legs,

“Great War Threatened—Powers Conferring—Sir Edward Grey's Efforts for Peace.” . . .

IX. Dust

He is feeling wearied as he is sitting at the dinner table with Nona, and he is just picking at the veal cutlet and the green peas on the plate in front of him.

Nona in her apricot-coloured frock. He is thinking that she is looking very pretty to-night, the dress suggesting colour in her dark skin, and the light from the old-rose shaded lamp lighting up her dark brown eyes.

“No, Whitey, dear,” she is remonstrating with mock severity, as the cat is preparing to spring into her lap, “your master will be awfully annoyed if you have dinner on the table. You must wait, Whitey. Now, be a good pussy and do what I say. He's wanting to be naughty, you know, Bobbles. He's a naw-w-w-fully wicked little pussy—aren't you, Whitey?”

Bob's eyes are shifting from the figure of the cat looking up from the carpet into Nona's face, and he is noticing four books piled on the top of the escritoire. With difficulty he is discerning the titles of them: “Love in the Desert,” “Passionate Hours,” “The Flaming Heart,” “Love Afire.”

“How did you get on about everything to-day, Bobbles?” Nona is asking, looking at him.

“Oh—not very well.”

“You didn't fail about the agency, did you?”

“It's not a matter of *failing* about anything,” he is saying, a little irritably.

“You got the agency, then?”

“No—of course, I didn't. Oh, I didn't want it that much. It doesn't matter a scrap.”

"I'm most awfully sorry, darling."

"Yes, well, it can't be helped. It's all over now. We'll have to forget it, that's all."

"And the Mordril building?"

"I didn't buy that."

"Oh? Were you disappointed about that, too?"

"It's nothing. I'm not disappointed, either. It's nothing at all."

"I expect you feel just mad about it, dear. You must, after wanting it so much."

"Well, it's no use talking about it. Have to let it rest."

"You're tired, aren't you?"

"I suppose I am. Things have gone wrong today, somehow. I tried to sell all that boric acid and borax glass I bought last week, and the price seems to be sinking to Hades. If I sell now I'll have to lose about four hundred pounds. And I might have to sell."

"Oh, Bobbles!"

"Don't worry about it. I'll get over it. It's enough that I have to worry."

There is silence for a few minutes, to relieve which Bob is asking in an effort to be brighter,

"What have you done with yourself, to-day?"

"Oh, I went to see Judith. I had afternoon tea with her."

"Well, I had lunch with Harold. How was Judith?"

"Darling, Judith isn't happy."

"Isn't she? I got the impression with Harold to-day that he wasn't happy either. What's the matter with them?"

"She says Harold is so irritable. They don't get on well together. I think it's an awful tragedy!"

"Is it so bad as that?"

"I think it is when people quarrel."

"Have Harold and Judith quarrelled?"

"Oh, I think they've had some rows. And I think people ought to put up with anything rather than quarrel. Quarrelling makes so much unhappiness. I'm dreadfully worried about poor Judith."

"What's all the quarrelling *about*?"

"I can't think. Judith works ever so hard in the house. I can't imagine how Harold could ever come to quarrel with her. She does so much for him. How she manages to get through all the work of their house, I haven't the least idea."

"Without a servant, too."

"Yes. Harold says they can't afford one. But the whole place is simply spotless. You couldn't possibly find a bit of dirt in it if you searched for

ages.”

“I know that.”

A moment later he is adding, “I wish our house was like it.”

“Spotless, you mean?”

“Of course. Don't you?”

“Well—” And Nona is shrugging her shoulders and going on eating.

Bob is putting down his knife and fork on his plate, and sitting back in his chair.

“You don't mean to tell me you *like* dirt in the house, do you?” he is asking, looking at her keenly.

“It isn't so awfully dirty as all that, Bobbles darling.”

“Dirty?” he is frowning. “It's a pig-sty!” But he is at once feeling regret that his tiredness has allowed him to express himself so candidly.

“You *are* dreadful, saying a thing like that,” Nona is declaring. “You know I don't like things to be dirty any more than you do. But we can't do anything. And anyhow the place *isn't* like a pig-sty.”

“It's covered in dust.”

“That's not true, I'm sure.”

He is pushing back his chair and walking quickly round to the mantelpiece.

“Not covered in dust?” he is challenging her. “Run your finger on this.” And he is rubbing his forefinger along the mantelpiece and showing it to her. “Isn't that dust? And on this?”—rubbing the clock—“and this?”—rubbing the black marble elephant—“and this?”—striding to the escritoire and rubbing the top of it—“and here, too?”—running his finger along the top of one of the chairs. “What do you call dust, if that isn't it?”

Nona's lips are trembling and she is pushing away her plate so sharply as to ruck up the table cloth.

“And now make a mess of the table cloth,” he is adding as he is sitting down again. “As if it isn't bad enough already, with stains all over it.”

“Oh—you—you cruel boy!” Nona is crying, trembling all over.

He is suddenly wishing he had said nothing and feeling annoyed with himself that he should have let all these words slip from his mouth in a tone of such sternness.

“You know I can't do anything to help it,” Nona is going on. “I'm always telling you that Mabel can't get through all the work. You say yourself that you don't expect she can do it all. Then you say we can't afford to have another servant. And you get angry because things aren't just as you'd like them. And you make me feel that somehow I'm to blame.”

“I didn't say you were to blame.” He is wishing he could overcome his pride sufficiently to add the word “darling,” and is realizing that they are

on the verge of a quarrel. He has no desire to do anything but preserve peace. He is sighing, and feeling he wants to soothe Nona, but is not sure how to. He is unhappy at the sight of her unhappy.

“But you make me *feel* that I'm to blame,” she is weeping, and dabbing her wet eyes. “That's what is so cruel of you.”

“I don't for one moment say that you're to blame,” and still he cannot overcome the little bit of pride that prevents his adding “darling.” “I do say that the house is extremely dusty, and I don't disguise the fact that I wish it were cleaner. I can't help wishing that our house was as clean as Judith's. It isn't pleasant to live in a filthy house.”

“There you go again. You use such awful words. It isn't *filthy*.”

“Well, we'll say no more about it. But when we're going to have another servant, I haven't the least idea. If I have to lose over four hundred pounds on this borax glass and boric powder, and there isn't anything to come from a Speedtype agency—”

“We're never going to be able to afford two servants.”

“So we're never going to have a clean house?”

“You're not expecting me to turn and start dusting and getting down on my hands and knees and—”

“No, I haven't said a word about anything of the kind.”

“Then do let us talk about something else.”

X. Admissions

He is lying in bed with Nona, and they are folded in one another's arms.

“I was going to tell you something at dinner,” Nona is saying, “only you were so cross.” And she is looking up into his face reproachfully.

He is smiling at her and kissing her lips and her eyes.

“What was it?” he is asking. “Something important?”

She is not speaking for a few moments, but now she is saying,

“We're going to have a baby,” and she is kissing his chin.

“Are you sure?”

“Oh, yes, I'm certain.”

“You darling little kid!”

He is smiling and clasping her more tightly, and in his mind he is seeing himself walking across the front lawn with a tiny child holding his hand and toddling by his side. A wave of delighted anticipation is possessing him. He is feeling that the future is not so dark but full of light—precious golden light.

“Are you pleased, Bobbles?”

“I was never more pleased about anything. It will be lovely to have a

little boy.”

“It mightn't be a boy.”

“Well, of course no. It might not be, I know.”

He is realizing that it is a boy he is looking forward to, and he is vaguely wondering whether this is because he wants a companion. He is wondering whether there is not a trace of loneliness in his life, whether he has not stuck too closely to carving his career and neglected to cultivate friends—real friends—friends who would understand him and all his aims, his moods, and his thoughts. He is going on to speculate on whether he hasn't been too much shut up in himself, with insufficient expression, and whether the true psychological reason for his wishing that Nona's baby will be a boy is that he subconsciously wants to see in the child a reflection of himself. But he is checking these thoughts, and the words are coming into his mind:

. . . Nona. She's my friend, and the only one I need. . . .

Nona is pressing closer to him, and saying, while her forehead is pressed against his cheek,

“It's so beautiful that we can cuddle like this, isn't it? Don't you think so?”

“Well—yes—yes, of course it is. You like to cuddle more than anything else, Nona, I believe.”

“What makes you think that?”

“I'm sure you'd rather do without anything than do without your cuddle.”

“I just love to love, Bobbles. That's all I live for.”

“I believe you do, you funny little child.”

“I'd just like to be loving you all the time—without ever ceasing. I would never get tired of loving you, Bobbles dear.”

“You funny little girl, Nona.” He is kissing her all over her forehead, and his mind is registering the words:

. . . Just a bundle of love. She lives for love. . . .

He is aware of a conflict in himself. He is feeling an urge to ask Nona a question, but something is warning him that he might be happier without an answer to it. Suddenly he is finding himself unable to repress asking,

“Nona, when you speak about love, what do you mean? I mean—I mean—what does—well what *is* love—to you?”

“What a queer thing to want to know! You know as well as I do what love is.”

“Yes, I have my idea of it. But what do *you* say about it?”

“Love? Well, you know when you feel love for a person. Surely you know what it is. It's hard to explain. But there's nobody who doesn't know what is meant by love. I know that I love you, Bobbles dear, yet I couldn't

tell you what it is that I feel. It's just that I love you.”

“Yes. I know all that. But at the same time” —and he is pursuing his question despite the element of warning in him—“well, tell me this: what would an *expression* of love mean to you?”

“How could I express love, do you mean?”

“Yes.”

For answer she is hugging him tightly and kissing him.

“Well?” he is asking when she has finished.

“I've given you my answer, you dense boy.”

“You mean cuddling and kissing?”

“Of course. You know that's what love is, you foolish old teaser. You're trying to make fun of me.”

“You mean that when you say you want to be loving me all the time, it's cuddling me that you're thinking of?”

“You know perfectly well what I mean, Bobbles. I would never get tired of loving you.”

“Cuddling me?”

“Well, isn't that loving you?”

“That's all I was asking you. To you, to love is just to kiss and to cuddle. If you're not kissing or cuddling, then you're not loving. That's what you mean, isn't it?”

“I'm not going to answer you. I'm sure you're just joking with me.”

“I'm not—honestly.”

“Well, what do you ask me such silly questions for? How else can you show love but by holding a person closely to you—and—kissing—and all that kind of thing?”

“We'll let it rest at that, dear.”

“I should think so, you silly ducky darling!” . . .

But now when he is turned away from her and is trying to coax sleep to waft him into unconsciousness, all his efforts at repression will not stop his mind from saying:

. . . It's just that she wants to cuddle. When she says she never tires of loving, she means she never tires of cuddling. Kissing and cuddling—that's what she wants to be doing all the day long. That's what makes her so fond of the cat—she wants to fondle it, cuddle it. It isn't that she's so fond of the *cat*: she's fond of stroking its smooth, clean fur; she likes to feel the cat's warm body and hear its cosy purring. It's physical all the time. She sees nothing beyond that. She doesn't see that love might be something more than this. . . .

He is sighing and shifting his body into a new position. He is feeling that he is disloyal and in every way hateful for allowing his mind to go on in

this way. But his mind is going on in spite of him:

. . . And lazy. Just a lazy, useless girl, indulgent, selfish. For hours together she can sit in a room that is crying out for dusters and sweeping brushes, and be reading novels—five or six a week. “Feverish Nights” — “The Silent Lover” — “Luscious Fruits”—“Hearts on Fire.” She knows that Judith keeps her home in perfect condition with no one to help her. And she's not ashamed that our house is unfit to live in despite that we keep a servant. But she thinks she loves me. That's all love means to her. Love. She has no notion of love. She hasn't touched the hem of it. She hasn't come within sight of it. she has no idea of its meaning. Yet she thinks she's filled with love. And all the time she's just selfish, shut up in herself, too lazy and indulgent to do anything but what gives her a low kind of physical, sensational pleasure. And if anything gives her that pleasure, there's no end to her wants of it. She wants to keep on and on—cuddling and reading sloppy novels, and she mustn't be put out in any way and I mustn't say a word against her and—and . . .

He is feeling miserable as his mind is keeping up its relentless indictment and the realization is being forced on him that his conception of Nona as a gay little fairy, full of love and sweetness, yielding herself in every way to help him, a loyal comrade, unselfish and sacrificing, is being draggled in the mud.

Chapter Five: The Father's Day

I. Getting Up

Early on a Sunday morning in the autumn of 1921, he is raised on his elbow in the double bed in the front bedroom of his rented bungalow at Bondi beach. He is smiling tiredly at Nona as he is looking down at her beside him, and is saying to her,

“I'm going for a walk.”

“What! So early?”

“It doesn't matter. All the better.”

“It's only a little after six, darling.”

“Yes, I know. But I'm going for a walk all the same. You don't want to have an argument about it, do you?”

“No. Go along, dear, go for your walk. But you know I've only just woken up, and we've had no cuddle, and here you are going straight away.”

“Good-bye,” he is saying, bending down and kissing her lips.

He is swinging out of the bed, the words in his mind:

. . . If I wait for you, it'll be more like twelve o'clock when I get up. Lying in bed hour after hour—gets on my nerves. . . .

“You're not forgetting that Babs has to be got away at five past eight, are you, darling?” Nona is asking as he is walking to the bedroom door on his way to the bathroom.

“No, I'm remembering.”

“You see, she must be away not a minute later than five past eight, because we don't want to keep the rest of the party waiting.”

“Oh, I'll be back in plenty of time.”

“It's just that you said you'd be responsible for her getting off in time, dear. And I should hate to think that any of Mrs. Perrin's arrangements were upset because of Babs being late.”

“Just leave it to me. I'll get her breakfast and everything.”

“And don't forget to impress upon her that she must do everything that Mrs. Perrin tells her.”

“All right, all right.”

“And, darling——”

“Oh, great Scott! something else?”

“Why, what's the matter, dear?”

“Well, what more do you want? I'm trying to get away and go for a walk.”

“But don't be angry, darling. You get more and more irritable every day.”

I can't say two words to you but you flare up. You used not to be like that.”

“It's no use talking like this. What else is it you want?”

“I was only going to say that when you bring my breakfast up to me, would you mind letting the tea stand just a few minutes longer than usual before you pour out my cup? You made it a wee bit weak last Sunday morning. And you know your mother likes her tea strong, too, dear. You'll remember mother's breakfast, won't you? You don't mind really, do you, dearest? And, darling, *could* you reach me my book?”

But he is already walking through the doorway and shutting the door forcibly behind him. He is sighing as he is thinking:

. . . Damn having to let the maid off every weekend. . . .

II. The Beach

Half an hour later he is dressed in his two-piece sports suit, and is leaving the bungalow, walking down the red tiled pathway across the front lawn, through the white wooden gate in the low white wooden fence, and along the new asphalt pavement of the road leading to the beach.

He is breathing in deep lungfuls of the sea-smelling air. An electric tramcar is pounding down the slope of the street facing the ocean front, on the last stage of its journey from town. Now it has thundered out of his sight, the noise of it has died away, and he can hear only the recurrent murmur of the ocean breakers, the distant rumble of the iron-tired wheels of a milk cart grinding over the tarred surface of a street not visible to him, and the metallic clop-clop of the hoofs of the horse drawing it.

. . . You're an irritable devil and no mistake, his mind is saying to him. Half the time you're flying off the handle, snapping at people who say a word to you. What's the matter with you? Nerves? Yes, it's nerves. My nerves gone to Jericho. I feel like a porcupine, only it's as though I had nerves sticking out instead of quills. I'm all touchy and so damnably sensitive. Oh, I'm all of a jangle. If I'd stayed in bed this morning with Nona, I'd have gone mad. All nerves, I know. Couldn't bear the thought of lazing on, just lying and cuddling—oh, God! let me *do* something. The time that's wasted in our house and the muddle and the confusion and the untidyness everywhere ——. It doesn't seem to worry Nona. But it's an awful example for Babs. Just at an impressionable age. I think she's six, isn't she? Born in the beginning of nineteen-fifteen, when I was at the war—yes, six years ago. The dear little kid. She's that pretty—my word, she's a pretty little child. It's not just because I'm her father that I think so, but she is, really and honestly, the dearest little girl I've ever seen. The quaintest little character. Funny! You get other children beside her, and

they seem quite dull. As sharp as a razor. Talk about alert! Misses nothing. Quick and active. Happy as can be. Brave little thing, too. Doesn't cry when she's hurt herself. Jolly plucky. Spirit and courage of her father? Huh! . . .

Across the tram-lines in the front street and through the gate in the fence bordering the lawn sloping down to the concrete sea-wall facing the beach. The broad stretch of pale yellow, clean, fine sand, and the waves of the Pacific breaking on to it in long, crashing, curling, foamy rollers. The heaving blue waves away out to the horizon. The brightness of the sun, its glare on the sands, the sparkle of the foam in it, and the rainbows constantly forming above the breakers in the mist from the sea spray.

. . . Well, her father used to have spirit enough, his mind is going on. But now—h'm, I don't know. I'm afraid I'm a pretty dull sort of customer now. All the life blown out of me. The war. Yes, I know. But it isn't that the war upset me so much as all that. If I had all the punch in me that I used to have, I could have built up my business again quickly enough, despite the war. What is it, then? What's been the matter with you the last few years? Oh, God alone knows. What with these nervous headaches I get—of course, I worry like I never used to do: it's no use saying I don't. And I don't seem able to eat anything that agrees with me. These everlasting pills, and charcoal and bismuth and what not. I suppose nerves are at the back of that, too. . . .

Along the promenade formed by the sea-wall, the sea breeze on his cheeks, the roar of the breakers in his ears.

. . . And yet nerves aren't the whole explanation of what's the matter with me. Somehow or other, *nothing* is satisfactory. You might as well be frank with yourself. I seem to be dissatisfied in every direction. I don't fit in properly anywhere. I haven't the same singleness of purpose that I used to have once. I used to be all out for a thing when I was younger. If I wanted something, I'd go for it for all I was worth, and get it somehow. But I'm not a fighter now. And I've got no aim at all. Where I'm bound for, God only knows. And you can't be successful in anything when you just drift. You can't bring off big deals when you're only luke-warm about them. You've got to have enthusiasm and joy in your work. And I'm stone cold towards everything. Why am I like this? I just am, that's all. When I was young and before the war I used to have visions of steadily progressing in my business, the thing expanding, absorbing other businesses, companies being floated, myself amassing a fortune. Here I am at thirty-five, and where's the expanded business and the amassed fortune?

Four people bathing in the surf. The four heads bobbing over the waves or disappearing under the breakers. The sparkle of the early morning sun

on the blue Pacific swell—a myriad dancing lights.

. . . A failure? his mind is saying. Failed to realize his ambitions? . . .

He is trying not to consider this suggestion, and is watching the bathers as he is walking along; but his mind is insisting:

. . . Beaten? The battle of life overcome you? Overwhelmed and defeated? Crushed? Mastered? . . .

And at length he is admitting:

. . . A failure. Yes, if you like: a failure . . .

Which admission to himself is like the stinging stroke from a lash, and there is a feeling of depression on him despite the brightness of the sun and of the colours all around him. There is a suggestion in his mind that the breeze off the sea blowing on his cheeks is like another element against him, defeating him, increasing his sense of failure. He is walking on against the breeze doggedly.

. . . Tried and been defeated. A failure . . .

Past the long wooden building comprising the refreshment kiosk and the dressing sheds. A motor-car stopping outside the kiosk, and three women and a man in dressing-gowns and kimonos over bathing suits stepping out of it and walking with swinging gait down across the sands.

. . . The war. Yes, but it's no use saying it was the war. I was beginning to be restless and discontented and altogether fed up just before the war. As a matter of fact, if I want to be frank with myself, it was because I was fed up that I went to the war. Going to the war solved the problem for the time. Or it postponed the solving of the problem. But the problem's still here. I'm no nearer the solution than I was before the war. I'm haunted. Whatever I do, there's always a whisper in my brain, "What's the use? Why bother about it? Why take the trouble? What does it matter?" When I was younger, if I'd wanted to buy some stuff that seemed likely to show a good selling profit and there were a lot of other people after it, I'd have been burning with zeal to beat them all and carry it off. But now I don't care enough to fight. If there's a lot of opposition against me, there's always the white-ant suggestion in my brain, "Why bother? Let the stuff go. It's not worth squabbling over. I don't want it that much." And the stuff does go, and I feel all flop. There seem no guts in me. I'm as flabby as a jelly-fish. Yet it's not because I've got no guts. Give me something worth fighting for, and I'll fight like blazes. But you must have something ahead of you worth while—something to draw you on—to draw the best out of you. You must have a clear aim—you must have a goal—you must have a bright light gleaming in the distance. Then if you keep your eyes on that bright light, you'll run on and on towards it whether the road is up hill or down—you'll climb mountains if they're between you and the light. But if you've no light

to fix your eyes on and you come to steep hills and the way seems hard, you ask yourself, Why? Why go to all the trouble to climb over the hill? That's how I am, and I've been like it for the last few years. Oh, I know I used to have a bright light shining ahead of me: but I've discovered it's only a Christmas tree candle. I used to be as keen as anybody on getting ahead in business, of making pulp of every competitor. But it doesn't stir me the least bit now. The idea of scrambling against somebody else to buy something you don't care a hang about—where's the incentive there? There's no joy in fighting. And if you're not a fighter, you're not a bit of good in business. You can smoothe it over as much as you like, and invent all kinds of fancy terms to cover it, but business remains what it is—scrapping. There's no true kindness in business, no real generosity, no beautiful feeling about it. Where there's competition there must always be some poor devil getting knocked about with nobody to care a damn about him. Oh, yes, of course, the world wouldn't go round without competition, and co-operation only produces slackness—and so on and so on. But what I'm saying is that business means competition, and competition is only a nice name for fighting—and as far as I'm concerned, to fight for your own good, to battle with another fellow for the sake of your own selfish gain is a rotten thing. That's where I stand. This is a world where opposition, competition, and conflict are the breath of progressive life. If you're not a fighter, you don't fit into the scheme. The world has no place for you. . . .

Wave after wave breaking, curling, crashing, foaming, and shooting up the sands. The roar, the tumble, the swishing noise of it. The water spread out to the highest point along the beach it can stretch to, now the pause at its height, now the back-rush of it, and its being swallowed up in a whirl of froth and churned sand by the wave succeeding it. Swish!—swish!—incessant, recurring, monotonous.

. . . But the world goes on and on, day after day and you're swept along in the current of it, whether you like it or not. You can't stand still. You can't cease to exist. I used once to be part of the current, putting more force into it, making it swifter, more deadly. Now I'm finished with it, it isn't for me, but I can't break away. I see no other current to go to, no other stream but this. That's what's the matter with me. . . .

III. Char-a-Banc

At a quarter to eight he is standing in front of the gas stove in the kitchen, his eyes now on the water boiling over three eggs in the little saucepan on one of the jets; now on his wristlet watch; and from the watch he is turning his eyes to the excited figure of Babs sitting at the kitchen table hurriedly

eating puffed wheat and milk from a basin.

“You'd better eat plenty, Babs,” he is saying to the child, and observing with a smile her flushed cheeks, her shining bright eyes, blue like his own, her brown hair, the colour of his own hair, but wavy and glossy and delicate in texture, her prettily shaped lips, full like Nona's, her little sun-burnt hands, her sun-burnt arms, her strong little body clad in its neat little pale blue frock, and her sturdy little sun-burnt legs swinging restlessly under the table.

“I don't feel a bit hungry, daddie dear,” she is sighing.

“That's because you're excited. But you'll be dreadfully hungry in the char-à-banc if you don't have a good breakfast. It will be a long wait before lunch.”

As he is speaking he is loving her—involuntarily wrapping her around with love.

“I can't possibly eat any more of these things, daddie dear,” and she is pushing the basin away and looking inquiringly at him.

“Are you sure? You've eaten scarcely any of them. You *will* be hungry before you get to National Park, you know.”

She is looking at him as if not knowing what to do, and her little sun-burnt forehead is wrinkled in perplexity.

He is thinking how pretty she is like this, but he is saying,

“Try some bread-and-butter—and marmalade.”

“Well, just a little piece. And you cut it, daddie dear.”

He is contorting his face in mock severity, and she is smiling and exclaiming half fearfully, half laughingly, “Oh, daddie, don't do that! You look horrible.”

He is winking, and carefully cutting a slice of bread from the loaf on the table. He is lovingly cutting the bread, but with the slice in his hand he is saying with a feigned sternness, “I suppose I'll have to butter it, too?”

“Yes please, daddie dear.”

He is spreading marmalade on it as well, and when he is finished and she is gingerly raising the burdened slice to her mouth, he is going to kiss the top of her head, but he is remembering that the eggs must have been boiling more than three minutes, and he is calculating on his watch and quickly spooning two of the eggs out of the water and leaving the third to boil hard. He is feeling that to go back to Babs now and kiss her will seem an excessive display of emotion and he is swallowing something in his throat and continuing to stand in front of the stove. There are thoughts in his mind of what mother has said about spoiling the child.

“How many of you are going in the char-à-banc?” he is inquiring.

“Thirty-one—with me.”

“Oh. And they'll nearly all be children, will they?”

“Yes, all children except Mrs. Perrin and Miss Arnold.”

“They're in charge of you, I suppose.”

“Yes, of course, daddie.”

“And do you know what time you're going to be back to-night?”

“Mrs. Perrin said half-past seven.”

“I see. And what are you going to do at National Park?”

“Play games, I suppose, daddie. You know—like they always do.”

“And you're going on the river, I expect?”

“I think somebody's going to take us on the river in rowing boats. And we're going to be rowed right up the river to a nice place to have lunch.”

“Well, you've been quick in swallowing that bread and marmalade. Couldn't you eat some more?”

“No, daddie dear, I'm full up.”

“You're just excited. Hallo, is this the char-à-banc? Sounds like it.” And he is striding to the window to see the long white vehicle coming to a standstill outside the front of the bungalow.

“Good-bye, daddie dear!” Her face is crimson and she is jumping up from the table and hastily kissing him as he is bending down to her.

“Have you said good-bye to mummie?”

“Yes, I said good-bye to mummie and to grannie.”

She is running out of the kitchen and up the hall. He is walking quickly after her, adjusting her hat, opening the front door for her, following her down the red tiled path across the lawn, and lifting her up into her seat. . . .

IV. Efficiency

At half-past ten he is sitting on the front veranda in a cane chair, trying to fix his attention on the pages of the *Sunday Sun*, which he is holding in front of him. But in his mind is a picture of that char-à-banc whirling along the dusty road, filled with laughing and shouting children, and Babs shouting and laughing as loudly as any of them; and in his ears through the open front door the sound is coming of mother's voice speaking at the telephone in the hall. He cannot catch her actual words, but he is aware that she is talking to Judith.

He is hearing mother calling his name.

“Bob! Are you there? Where are you?”

“Yes, mother. What is it?”

“Oh, Bob! Come here. Wherever are you?”

He is standing up and throwing the newspaper into the chair, and now he is walking into the hall and seeing mother clad in her kimono over her

night-dress, her lace boudoir cap covering her grey hair, walking into the sitting room.

“Here I am,” he is saying. “What do you want?”

“Oh, Bob!” She is sitting on the couch beside the window, and he is noticing how pale her cheeks are. “Oh, Bob!” And she is looking at him wearily.

“Is something the matter with Judith?” he is asking, and standing with his hands in his blazer pockets in front of her.

“Harold has left her.”

“What?”

“Harold—he's gone off. He's left her.”

“You don't mean——”

“She rang me up to say so.”

“You can't tell me——”

“He didn't come home all last night.”

“But that means nothing. What foolery! He's had an accident somewhere. Hasn't she rung up the hospitals or something, or——?”

“He rang up this morning. This is what she told me just now.”

“What did he say?”

“He said he was at the Hotel Clance at Manly.”

“Alone?”

“No. It's a woman he's been going with for months.”

She is panting with excitement. He is feeling bewildered and is sitting in the arm-chair beside her.

“Poor Judith!” he is saying. “What on earth is she going to do?”

“What can she do?”

“I don't know. But she must be feeling awful. She'd better come over here to us for the day.”

“Yes, I should have asked her. I didn't think about it. I was so confused.”

“I'll telephone her at once, and she can come for dinner.”

“You wouldn't leave her to have dinner at home—and come here in time for afternoon tea?”

“Why? The less she's left by herself the better.”

“I was just wondering whether Nona had enough meat in the house. I think she ordered only enough for the three of us, you know.”

“Oh, hang that! She can have my dinner. And it would be just as well if she stayed here the night, and perhaps until something can be arranged for her.”

“Where will you put her?”

“The only thing is for her to sleep with you. Yours is a double bed. You wouldn't mind for Judith's sake, would you?”

“You know I like to sleep by myself, Bob.”

“It would be only until we could fix up Judith some other way.”

“But it would be a terrible inconvenience. It's a lot to ask of me, dear. I must have my night's rest.”

“All right—all right. Don't say anything more about that. But we can have Judith to dinner, anyhow.”

They are both silent for a little while, and he is picturing Harold in Manly at the Hotel Clance and imagining a woman laughing with him and hugging and kissing him, and Harold trying to be care-free with her but burdened with a consciousness of guilt.

“If Judith won't come here for dinner, Bob ——”

“Eh?”

“I say, ask Judith if you like—but will she come here for dinner?—or come here at all?”

“Why not?”

“She rarely does come here, does she? You more often go there.”

“You mean she doesn't like coming here?”

“Well——”

“On account of the muddle we're usually in— and the dirt and the dust and the untidiness. Is that what you're thinking of?”

“Well, Judith *is* so particular.”

“She's frightfully so, I know.”

“She's so efficient herself, and she can't bear to be where there isn't just the same efficiency.”

“If only this place were as tidy and well run as hers, it'd be beautiful. I can't imagine why Harold wasn't happy with Judith. To my mind, she's an ideal wife.”

“There's certainly nothing she can't do in the house.”

“She works hard, she scrubs and polishes continually, and she's a good cook. Why wasn't Harold satisfied? If he had to put up with my house he'd have had some cause to be discontented.”

“Yes, everything in Judith's house has been from the beginning on strictest business lines. She's been business-like and efficient about everything. Not a penny has been spent out of Harold's salary but there's been an account of it. She's kept proper account books and entered up every item. Every evening she's made the entries. Harold used to tell her how much he'd spent during the day and on what. And she would enter all her own expenditure. There was never any muddle. Harold could always know to the last penny exactly where his salary had gone.”

“Which is a lot more than I ever can.”

“And you know how she insisted on tidiness. If you're not actually

reading a book, even, you mustn't leave it on the table or on a chair: you must put it back in the book-case. The newspaper, if it isn't being read, must be kept on the newspaper file."

"Yes, I know. Judith has a tidy mind, and she likes things tidy around her. Judith thinks about things, sums things up. Most of us mess along anyhow—sloppily. There's nothing sloppy or sentimental about Judith."

"Oh, she's not a scrap sentimental. She's always in favour of what seems most sensible and most effective. Harold and she haven't slept together for years, as you know. She is sure it's unhealthy for people to sleep two in a bed. That's why they've had separate beds in separate rooms."

"I'm not at all sure she's not right. And we must be sensible and efficient about these things."

"Oh—of course——"

"It's just as well, too, that she hasn't any children. They would have complicated matters now frightfully."

"Judith has always believed that you have no right to have children unless you have a proper nursery and a proper trained nurse. She put off having children year after year in the hopes of Harold being able to afford having everything just right. Now, of course, she's forty and she won't think of having a child because it would so upset the house. And she feels she couldn't bear the continual worry of that."

"Well, most children are an awful worry and a strain. Babs is really an exceptional child. Children generally are not like her. I think that on the whole Judith has all through been a perfect wife. She's always been competent and energetic and thorough in everything. And here Harold has left her. It's a puzzle to me."

V. Thunderstorm

At four o'clock he is weeding the garden surrounding the front lawn. The smell of earth is in his nostrils as he is turning it up under the weeds, and there is the smell of the weeds as he is tearing them out of the ground, their hairy roots clinging to lumps of soil which he is banging off them with the little fork. He is feeling that the afternoon sun is very hot; he is looking up now and again at the grey and black clouds gathering up against the sky, ominous, threatening; and the word is in his mind:

. . . Thunder. . . .

He is hearing the voices of Judith, Nona, and mother from where they are conversing on the front veranda, and he is reflecting:

. . . Can't say I'm sorry she's not going to stay the night. Her own arrangement for mother to go back to-night with her is a damned sight

better. Uh! It was Nona who asked her, "Didn't you really love Harold?" That was after Judith had said she couldn't disguise the fact that she wasn't sorry Harold had gone, so long as he would still provide for her. "Oh, don't talk to me about love," says Judith. "I've never had time for that sort of thing. I've always been too busy. It's always been Harold's complaint," she says: "did I never have time for love? Such sentimental rubbish!" she says. "Oh, he's always been such a sentimental idiot. He would have made an absolute fool of me if I'd let him. Love, love, nothing but love. What would the house have been like if I'd always given way to him? I've always had to work like a slave to keep the house clean. And Harold has never appreciated it," she says. "I never saw a more unappreciative man. It used positively to annoy him if he saw me cleaning. 'Damn the house!' I've heard him say. 'You're just a servant, not a wife!' What's the use of our being together when he goes on like that? How could I possibly neglect the house while I was just bothering on with him?—at theatres, picture-shows, dances and parties, and goodness knows what else. What *would* the house have been like if I'd been the sort of woman he'd wanted?" . . .

And with the memory of Judith as she was saying this at the dinner table, he is sighing and jabbing his fork angrily under a nettle.

. . . "You know how untidy Harold has always been," he is remembering Judith saying. "He had no idea of keeping a house neat. And he wouldn't learn. For the last twelve months he's been simply obstinate—pig-headedly so. It's been the limit. He wouldn't take the slightest notice of anything I said to him. He simply ignored me. Oh, he's made me that wild, I could have banged his head off. He's been most aggravating. I could never make him be careful in the bath so as not to splash, and he would insist on using the shower, though he knew that the water went on to the walls. He was determined to tantalize me. He's made my life a burden, so that I don't think I could have stood him any longer. I couldn't make him take off his shoes before he came into the house so that he wouldn't bring dirt on to my carpets. He'd come in time after time from the office and plump himself straight into one of the best chairs before he'd changed a single thing. I was all on edge as soon as he came into the house for fear of what he would take it into his head to do next. I've known him be reading the paper, and when he's finished with it simply toss it on to the couch and, as cool as you like—walk out of the room! Oh, I could punch him when he's done that. I hardly think there was a day when I didn't have to scold him for shaving in his bedroom and leaving soapsuds on the window sill. And the rows we've had about his habit of shaking his socks in his room after he's taken them off at night!—and about his having the sitting room window open and not drawing the curtains well back so that no dust will get on them! It's been

almost more than I could bear—the incessance of it. Not one thing—but a hundred and one things. Every day I've had to be at him about something. There was never a chance for us to be long at peace, he was so exasperating.” . . .

The thunder-clouds over against the horizon swiftly coming nearer. Their grey-black depths. Their fleecy volume. The swelling contours of them, reaching forward, closer and closer, like mountainous billows.

. . . There'll be a deluge before I finish this weeding, he is thinking. It's going to come down in torrents. Jolly soon, too. Where will Babs be now? At National Park. Ought to be starting to come home soon. They were going to row up the river and picnic somewhere among the trees along the bank. That was the idea. This storm. Will they catch it? Mrs. Perrin is bound to make sure all the children get under shelter. How *could* Judith have put off having a child?— until now she doesn't want one at all? What would I be like if there were not Babs? How devilish selfish of her not to have a child. How diabolical of her to put off having one because she couldn't bring it up in perfection. Confound this perfection. Be bothered to this efficiency. A perfect wife? She's been a rotten wife. She's been a vacuum cleaner, a card index, an adding machine, a carpet sweeper—not a wife. . . .

And while he is hearing the increasing roll and boom of thunder, the image in his mind of Judith as an ideal wife—capable, clever, full of commonsense—is fast being driven out by his new conception of her as a nagging, brawling termagant, thinking more of her own system of order than of any one else's comfort, married to bricks and mortar, chairs and carpets and metal polish, rather than to a husband. . . .

There are rapid strokes of lightning vividly traced against the darkness of the approaching clouds, and a few seconds later there is a sound of splitting and crashing, and now a long, drum-like roll, and more lightning streaks and again dull booming like a distant explosion.

He is pausing in his work with the little fork and watching the great mass of cloud, imminent, impending. The sunlight is shut out, and there is a growing darkness. He is suddenly aware that his heart is thumping, and he is involuntarily assuring himself there is nothing to fear. There is a puff of cool wind in his face and he can hear the rustle of leaves in the trees on the other side of the street.

. . . It's coming, are the words in his mind . . .

There is more lightning and a tearing, breaking, bursting roar.

“Do come in, darling,” he can hear Nona's voice calling. “You'll be sopping wet.”

“All right—all right!”

. . . Though why be irritable just because she calls you? . . .

He can feel a big drop of water splash on the back of his hand. The leaves are rustling wildly in the trees. The black clouds seem very low.

. . . Babs? All those children? Mrs. Perrin get them all under shelter? . . .

Another drop of water, this time on his cheek. Now a drop on his head. He can hear the heavy drops pattering on the roadway and the pavement and all around him. He is feeling that he is getting wet, and with his fork in his hand he is running across the lawn and up the stone steps on to the veranda.

. . . Babs? All right about Babs? his mind is going on. . . .

The veranda is deserted—the three women gone inside. But he is feeling that he does not want to follow them. He is sitting down and leaning back comfortably in one of the cane chairs, and watching the rain increasing to a steady pour, great heavy drops, swift and straight. More lightning and more thunder, now farther away, and the continuous hum and his-s-s-ss! of the pouring rain. The moist air. The film of water over the lawn. The gurgle of the storm-water drain at the street corner. The roll of the thunder now quite distant.

He is remembering that in his childhood, mother's servant Marie used to say that thunder was God's voice warning people of their wickedness and that lightning was a token of God's wrath. . . .

VI. The Telephone

Tea at half-past five, and shortly after six o'clock Nona and he are saying good-bye to Judith and mother. They are all walking down the tiled pathway, shiny and slippery with wet, though the rain has ceased over an hour ago; and the white wooden gate is shedding drops of water clinging to it as he is pulling it open.

“Well, good-bye!” Judith is saying, waving her hand, and walking along the pavement. “Come along, mother.”

But mother is kissing Nona, and saying, “Good-bye, my dear little girl!” And now she is kissing Bob. “Good-bye, Bob. Don't forget to tell Babs that her grannie had to leave. But she must come over and see grannie at Judith's. You'll bring her, won't you, Nona? Now I must hurry off.”

“Whatever are you doing, mother?” they can hear Judith calling, several yards away.

“Good-bye, dears!”

“Good-bye—good-bye!”

As Nona and he are walking back up the wet pathway, he is breathing in

deep lungfuls of air and feeling that it is so cool, so fresh, so bracing. He can smell the plants and very faintly the lawn grass and the earth. He is feeling that everywhere there is a cleanness and a sweetness. Everything looks washed.

“When is Babs to be home, did you say?” Nona is asking as they are lazily mounting the stone steps up to the veranda.

“She said something about seven o'clock. Mrs. Perrin thought about seven o'clock. But I expect it might be eight or nine before they're actually back.”

“I do hope they haven't got wet. I don't want Babs to catch a cold. I suppose they'll have got this storm.”

“Possibly not. It might have passed right over them.”

“Let us hope it has. Is that the telephone?”

“Sounds like it.”

“You answer it, darling.”

“I'll answer it.”

They are in the hall, and Nona is walking into their bedroom. He is walking along to the telephone against the wall beside the entrance to the sitting room.

“Yes, hallo!” he is saying into the transmitter, the receiver casually held to his ear.

There is the response of a very faint voice.

“Is that Mr. Robert Watson?” it is saying.

He is listening carefully to catch the words.

“Yes—speaking,” he is giving answer. “Who is that?”

“This is Dr. Dampnell speaking——”

“I can't hear you very well. Dr. Dampnell, did you say?”

“Dr. Dampnell of Loftus. I'm speaking from the police station at Loftus.”

“What? The what? Where are you speaking from?”

“Loftus—near National Park.”

“Yes—yes——”

“I have some rather bad news for you.”

“Will you speak up? I can't make out——”

“I say I have some very bad news for you.”

“Eh?”

“Your little girl was with a party at National Park to-day——”

“Yes—yes—that's right.”

“I don't know whether you had a bad storm over your way——”

“Yes—dreadful.”

“It was very bad here.”

“Yes—yes.”

"The party of children, so I understand from Mrs. Perrin, the lady in charge of them, had just finished afternoon tea and were preparing to get into the boats and row back to where the char-à-banc was waiting."

"Yes——?"

"Mrs. Perrin tells me that the storm came on then, so they decided to shelter under some trees."

"Eh?"

"Under some trees. It seemed a foolish thing, because the lightning was so strong. There were some very vivid flashes. But there was no other shelter where they were."

"Yes, yes. Was anybody injured?"

"Your little girl was standing under a tree with five other children. Without any word, she simply fell down."

"What?"

"Fell down. Quite unconscious. I was sent for."

"Do you mean——?"

"When I arrived, I examined the child. But it is quite clear what happened. She was evidently struck by lightning."

"Oh, God! You can't mean——?"

"I'm very sorry to say she was quite dead. Simply instantaneous. None of the other children was touched. She seemed to have received the full force of it."

"My God!"

"Needless to say, Mrs. Perrin has been almost distracted. But nobody was to blame. It was nobody's fault. It was the most natural thing that they should all seek shelter under the trees rather than stand out in the rain."

"Yes, yes, of course."

"Mrs. Perrin has asked me to apologise to you for her not telephoning to you herself. But you'll understand how she feels."

"Oh, yes, quite."

"Though I have never met you, Mr. Watson, I should like to tell you how deeply sorry I am for you. It has been a most unfortunate affair. If I can do anything to help you in any way, don't fail to tell me. There will have to be an inquest, I expect. Just a formal thing."

"What has been done, Dr. Dampnell?"

"Well, the child was brought on here. The police will want you to identify her."

"I see. Oh, God, I see. Yes, I'll go. All right."

"You needn't come here to-night. I should think it will be time enough to-morrow. You won't want to be bothered with anything to-night."

"No, no. All right. All right. I'll go to-night, though. Yes, I'll go. Good-

bye—er—Dr. Dampnell. Thanks so much for your trouble.”

“No, no. Nothing at all.”

“Very good of you to have rung me up. Well, good-bye.”

“Do accept my deepest sympathy, Mr. Watson. . . . Good-bye.”

He is blinking his eyes as he is putting back the receiver on its hook. There is an indistinctness about the telephone, which he is attributing to the dimness of the light by the wall where the instrument is fixed.

He is feeling for the handle of the sitting room door, and pushing the door open. The round table in the middle of the room. The couch under the window. It seems very blurry. He is keeping on blinking his eyes, trying to see things clearly.

. . . Babs, his mind is saying. “Deepest sympathy, Mr. Watson.” Babs. Struck by lightning. “Nobody was to blame.” Where's Nona? What's the matter with me? . . .

He is walking across the carpet, and now turning round, blinking, wondering why his eyesight is suddenly so bad. There is a feeling of buzzing in his head, and he is shaking his head and still blinking his eyes, and trying to make himself right.

. . . Fainting? Am I? . . .

And he is stamping his feet on the carpet, trying to keep conscious.

. . . Where's that brandy? Or some water. The sideboard. Babs. Nona. A glass. . . .

He is walking to the sideboard, which is swiftly fading from him, and now is gone.

VII. Weak

He can hear a gasping of breath from above his face, and feel something cold and damp being moved across his forehead. There is something against his lips. A glass? He is drinking semiconsciously, and now consciously.

. . . Brandy and water? . . .

Lying on his back. The hardness of where he is lying. He is opening his eyes. The ceiling. The sideboard. The table legs.

. . . On the floor? . . .

“Darling?”

. . . Nona. . . .

He is looking to his left. Nona's face, drawn and pale. Her cheeks wet. Her wet eyes.

“Darling, you fainted. Whatever made you do it?”

“Eh?”

. . . Fainted. And I'm lying on the floor. Pillow under my head. Feel weak. . . .

“Are you better? Just lie where you are for a while, then I'll help you into the bedroom. You poor old dear. You fainted, you silly boy. Fancy doing that!”

She is kissing his lips, and he is feeling better.

“I must have fainted,” he is saying. “I feel awfully weak.”

“Yes, don't stir. I heard a terrible bump while I was in the bedroom. And I thought to myself, whatever is that? I came out and here you were lying on the floor, and as white as a sheet. You gave me a terrible fright. I didn't know at first what to do. Then I poured out some brandy for you. And I've been bathing your head. I wonder what could have made you faint?”

“I can't think. I came in here for something.”

“You'd been answering the telephone, don't you remember? Whom were you speaking to?”

“On the telephone? Oh, yes. I remember now. Oh, God, yes, I remember!”

“Who was it? Was it what you heard on the telephone that upset you, dearest?”

. . . Babs, his mind is saying. Lightning. Struck by lightning? Surely——
. Babs? Killed by ——? “Deepest sympathy, Mr. Watson.” *Dead? Babs?* .
. . .

He is remembering the appearance of her sturdy sun-burnt little legs swinging restlessly under the kitchen table. And it is as though an impenetrably black pall of night has fallen over him.

“Darling? Who was it?”

But he is not answering. He is recollecting his words to Dr. Dampnell, “Yes, I'll go. I'll go to-night.”

. . . To identify. At Loftus. By lightning. “Simply fell down.” Nona. What can I say to her? Cry her eyes out. She'll have to know. Tell her. Say. But what? Struck by lightning. Instantaneous death. . . .

“Darling? Why don't you answer me? Whom were you speaking to on the telephone?”

“I'll have to go now. I'm feeling all right. I've promised to go to town. I must go at once. I can't waste time.”

“Where are you going to?”

“Into town.”

“Is it something about—Babs?”

“Into town. I said I'd go to-night. Let me get up.”

“You're not fit. Have some more brandy.”

“Where is it?”

He is drinking more brandy while he is raised on his elbow, against the carpet. He is still feeling weak, but he is struggling up and now he is standing on his feet unsteadily.

Involuntarily he is putting his arms round Nona and she is clasping him tightly and looking earnestly into his face. All his love for Babs he is feeling now for Nona, and he is kissing her passionately as he has not done for years. There are still tears in Nona's eyes, and it is as if she is divining something of what he is wanting to tell her.

"I wish you'd tell me what it's all about," she is saying to him.

He is shaking his head, for he is feeling moisture in his own eyes, and he is not sure enough of himself to speak. Instead he is kissing her again and again, and is managing to utter, "Good-bye."

"Good-bye, my dearest sweet boy!" from Nona.

A feeling of terrible loneliness is seizing him as he is walking away from her. He is realising too, that he is still weak. He is pausing with his hand on the sitting room door knob, unable to make up his mind whether to go or to have more rest. But the prospect of remaining and not being able to tell Nona what is in his mind is daunting him. He is wanting to think first what he can say to her.

He is opening the door and walking into the hall. The hall-stand. His felt hat. He is reaching up his hand to it, but he is feeling so weak and giddy that he is dropping his hand to his side.

. . . I can't go, the words are in his mind. Not yet. . . .

He can hear Nona following him into the hall.

"Are you going to be long away?" she is asking.

"I—I don't know." But his mind is saying:

. . . About Babs. Tell her? How to begin. Oh, I can't go out yet. I couldn't walk to the tram stop. Oh, Nona. Dearest. Babs. At National Park. Babs. I won't go just yet. . . .

"Where *are* you going to, Bob? Do tell me."

He is turning round and walking tiredly past Nona and back into the sitting room.

"I must sit down again," he is explaining. "Still not right."

He is flopping down on the couch and watching Nona slowly approaching him. The worried expression on her face. She is sitting beside him and putting her arm round him and drawing him closely to her.

. . . No good going on like this, the words are in his mind. I must get away. Babs. To tell Nona. Your duty. She knows nothing. You must speak. Nona, dear. The poor love. Her kiddie as well as yours. Her right to know . . .

"Your nerves are all upset, Bob. You're not in a fit state to go out of this

house. You're not at all well. Are you sure you must go? Is it so important? On a Sunday?"

He is nodding his head, and feeling wretchedly ill and overwrought.

. . . She must be told, his mind is saying. Sooner or later. Gently. Spare her. But tell her. Your arm round her. She needs all your sympathy. . . .

"Was that telephone message anything about Babs, dear?" Nona is asking him. "Say whether it was. Yes or no."

He is putting his arm round her and squeezing her tightly to him. He is kissing her and saying, "Yes."

"What? Some accident?"

"Yes. It was the storm. The lightning."

"Do you mean that Babs has been hurt? Do tell me, dear."

"I don't think there could have been any pain. That was Dr. Dampnell of Loftus speaking to me at the telephone. He said that when the storm came on the children were all sheltering under trees. Babs suddenly fell. The doctor says there's no doubt that she was struck by lightning."

"Do you mean—dead?"

He is holding her fast to him and kissing her again.

"I didn't know how I could tell you. Our only child. The dearest angel. Nona, my darling!"

Her face is hidden against his shoulder. He can feel the sobbing convulsions of her body against his own.

"Nona, dear, don't ever let me be mean or nasty to you again. Let us be truly loving always. I don't want to be bad-tempered or harsh. I love you more than anything in the world, Nona my loveliest!"

As the minutes are going by he is feeling that he has never felt a love for Nona so strongly. It is as though a force were flowing out from every part of him and folding her up in it; as though a very cloud of warmth and brightness were compassing her round and he was protecting her with its radiance.

At length Nona is not sobbing and gradually she is ceasing to cry. She is not lifting her head, but is continuing to nestle close against him. His arms are still holding her firmly. And in a little while he is feeling what he has felt before, a peace that is a very deep peace, a peace that is like a soft body of air descending on him—quietly, gently.

For some time longer he is feeling thankful for this sense of peace, grateful that there can be this peace in the midst of their sorrow.

. . . What *is* this something so peaceful that I feel? the words are coming into his mind. I felt it first one night in the old office before the war. Since then I've felt it now and again at different times. One early morning in the line in France. And several times when I couldn't sleep at night in hospital.

It was there. It has no voice. It doesn't speak. It doesn't move. It isn't anything that can be seen. It just is. And it's more than a feeling of peace. It's a complete body of life. It is life—a life. The peacefulness is what it is in its entirety. That sums it up. But somehow there is in that life a great love, an infinite patience, a shining purity, a tenderness, a gentleness, a steadfast strength, and a deep wisdom—wisdom beyond all exhausting. Yet with it all, humility beyond description. What is it? It *is* as surely as I am. Is it in some way a higher part of myself? But I'm not like it. I have never created it. It is far off beyond me. Yet it is human—human nature grown and expanded beyond all dreams. Peace and strength, purity and wisdom, tenderness, gentleness, and patience; and love that would enfold the world. What can it be? And why is it? Why do I feel it? What has it to do with me? . . .

Nona is turning up her face to him, and he is seeing how red are her eyes and how shiny her cheeks with tears.

“Bob, are you still thinking of going out tonight?”

“I must go, dear. It must be done.”

“What must be?”

“Babs must be identified.”

“Where?”

“At Loftus.”

“But that's a long way. You mustn't go so far alone. I'll come with you.”

“No, dear. I'll get Mrs. Blean from next door to come and stay by you.”

“But I can't bear to think of you going all that way by yourself. It'll be miserable for you. You'll be so depressed. It will upset you so much if you go alone.”

“All right, you brave little woman. I'll hire a car—and you can come with me.”

VIII. God

It is three hours later that he is walking after the police sergeant at Loftus into the dimly lighted little room at the police station. He is noticing the bare walls, the long table at the end of the room, and the sheeted mound on the table; and he is feeling glad that he has insisted that Nona shall not come into this room with him.

“It's been very sad, sir,” he can hear the sergeant saying, but he is not finding himself able to reply. He is feeling that the little room is dreadfully depressing, seeming to suggest that there is in the world no brightness, no cheer, nothing but grief, melancholy, tears and distress, and nothing in human-nature that can contend against this black, smoky pall of

unutterable night.

No hope, no hope! the suggestion is with him, and mingled with it a feeling that is like a great weight, of the unspeakable tragedy of his beautiful little Babs lying there.

The sergeant is slowly lifting back the white sheet that is concealing the mound on the table, and Bob's dull and heavy eyes are watching the revealing of the wavy, glossy, soft brown hair, the pale forehead, the closed eyes, the pale cheeks—Babs.

“There isn't a mark on her, sir,” the sergeant is saying.

“No.”

Pale, but otherwise as though she were sleeping. Still and pale. Silent for ever. Babs.

“Yes, she is my daughter, sergeant.”

“Very well, sir.”

The man is holding back the sheet and looking to him to signify when he shall put it over the face again. Bob's heart is thumping. He is remembering that Nona is waiting for him, and he is nodding his head. The sergeant is slowly drawing up the sheet. Over Babs. So still, so silent—so dead. . . .

Half an hour later, Bob is sitting beside Nona in the darkness of the motor-car returning to Sydney. The purr of the car's engine, the lazy creaks of the body as the wheels are dipping into the road's hollows, the wind in their faces, the trees on either side leaping up into the broad arc of the car's head-lights and slipping past it into the darkness again. The feel against his hand of the rough serge of Nona's coat as, with his arm round her, he is pressing her close to him.

For mile after mile they are saying nothing. But his mind is registering the words:

. . . Oh, God! the horror of it! This morning she was a bright, sunny child. Now she is dead flesh. No mark on her—no sign. No *reason!* A radiant, laughing kiddie—and now cold—still—lifeless. Struck down—blindly. An unseen hand. No warning, no cry—just death. Oh, God, how wicked! How diabolically wrong! How brutal, how inhuman! Such an innocent life to be so unnecessarily taken. She is just dead. For no purpose, for no good. My God, no good can come of it. Just devilishly criminal. God, how can You do this? Nobody's fault, nobody's sin, nobody's violation of a law that must bring its punishment. If it was violation of a natural law that she should shelter under a tree, why do You let the other children live? Why was Babs picked out?—and the rest let free?—that dear, sunshine spirit of fun and loveliness. There's no explanation there—that she broke some natural law. The thing is, how can anything so appallingly wrong be allowed to happen? How can it be? It's too awful.

How could You look on and see it done? What does it mean? There can't be any Power in the universe capable of protecting the life in it. Not even the precious young life. You, God, You cannot have the power. . . .

The rushing of the cool wind. The murmuring of the engine of the car. The dim racing by of the spectral trees. Their towering branches, lifting to the sky. The bungalows, with their lighted windows. The barking of a dog. A man riding a bicycle. The hissing echo of the car's noise from the passing bridge parapet. And again the gaunt trees. The trees. The trees.

. . . Nature, his mind is saying. Just the blind force of Nature. No intelligence behind it, no discrimination, no thought of shielding life. The lightning—the natural force. The blind urge in it to contact the earth. And Babs stood innocently in the way. No great love to turn the lightning aside. Just that blind force, and its wild strike to earth regardless of what it destroyed. No great power brooding over the world and shifting here and guarding there to prevent such a catastrophe as this. It is a world of violent, raging energies, unharnessed, adrift. No kindly, guiding intelligence. Just Nature. And what we call God—what is it? Nature. What we call Mother Nature. That groping, pushing instinct. If God were anything more, the tragedies that no human failing is accountable for, could not be allowed to come about. No kind, no gentle Life could let these things pass by. Just Nature, the blind urge of Nature—that is “God.” Useless to think of that god as good. It is evil, too. It is both good and evil—by chance. But in itself it is neither, consciously. It produces good or evil just as circumstances shape themselves to receive the forces it pours out. It has no thought of their effect on us. It is blind, blind, blind. . . .

Chapter Six: The New Day

I. Early

In the early morning of a Spring day in 1926 he is waking up in bed and looking at the time by his illuminating wristlet watch. The little figures and the hands gleaming green against the surrounding darkness are indicating a quarter to five; and he is turning over again.

. . . Don't think Nona's awake, he is thinking, his eyes on the vague outline of her head on the pillow. Try and go to sleep again. . . .

His eyes are closed, and he is letting himself lose consciousness. But instead of helping him to do so, his mind is saying:

. . . Quarter to five. Quarter to six, quarter to seven—two hours. Must get up at quarter to seven. . . .

The realization is making him feel wakeful. He cannot be sure that he will not sleep too late if he goes to sleep again, now. He is turning on to his back and looking beyond the foot of the bed at the window, visible against the darkness of the room by the pale light of dawn shining on the veranda.

In his imagination it is a quarter to seven, and he is getting up, bathing, shaving, dressing, breakfasting, and riding in the electric tramcar to his office. The thought of it all is making him frown and sigh, and shift restlessly between the sheets.

. . . The damned monotony, the words are coming into his mind. Every day, day after day. Get up, wash, shave, eat your breakfast, go to the office, work at things you don't care a scrap about, have lunch, the same thing again in the afternoon, working away without any real interest, come home, have dinner, read the paper or something, or go to the pictures or to a theatre, and then bed. Next morning, get up, wash, shave, have your breakfast, go to the office—round and round and round—and the whole thing means nothing. There's nothing in it. No sense in it. It all leads nowhere, gets you no further. Just madness. You're tied to a wheel and carried round and round and round—no escape from it. You *have* to get up, *have* to wash, *have* to shave, *have* to eat your breakfast, *have* to go to the office. Oh, I know you needn't wash if you don't want to, and you can grow whiskers, or you can starve and you can neglect your business—but only theoretically. I'm made that way that I couldn't neglect to wash, and I hate whiskers, and I haven't the will-power not to eat, and you've got to earn your living some way, and to me business is as good as anything. But that's not the point at all. The point is that there is this urge in you—this compulsion, this pressure, this inescapable, impelling current of life. I have

to go on. And all the time there's nothing to satisfy the reason in me why I should go on. I haven't the slightest interest in going on. Apart from this urge and pressure, there's nothing that makes me want to go on. There's nothing to go on for. Just to live. But I don't want to live. I don't get any satisfaction out of merely living. It gives me no joy, no pleasure, apart from superficial ripples of pleasure that hide up what is really behind me. Outwardly I don't think I look any less happy than most average people. But there *isn't* anything that I can see that is enough to make me want to keep up this round of existence. The whole thing is dead. . . .

He is turning on to his side again.

. . . Might as well go to sleep again as think these doleful thoughts. Nona. Of course, Nona. I must keep going for her sake. Dear little woman. Yes, I know all that. Must work to support her and keep the home. And I'm quite willing to go on for her sake. That's quite all right. I'll work on for ever to support her. But still—. Inspiration. It isn't an inspiration. I know it ought to be. And once it was. But—. Ah, dear. Why do all our human idols fall? Why do we always end up by seeing that our heroes have their feet very much planted on the earth? Why is it that to get to know anybody really well is to be disillusioned? Can no one stand the test? Is no one proof against an intimate acquaintance? Do we think people perfect only when we don't really know them? . . .

There is a picture in his mind of Nona going on from day to day—Nona dawdling away her time lying in bed, Nona lazily dressing, Nona muddling with the meals during the week-ends, Nona at afternoon tea parties, Nona spending hour upon hour reading novels that to him are drivel.

. . . Oh, a dear little woman, I know; she means well, and in her way she loves me—is devoted to me; never seems to tire of me, never gets impatient with me. And, of course, I love her; and there's no getting away from it. But—but—what would it *matter* if in some manner all this life that she lives were to cease to be—evaporate—dissolve into nothing? How would the world be any the worse? Rotten thoughts these are, I know. I can't help it, though. No use in humbugging yourself. If these thoughts are in me, they are in me, and that's an end to the matter. No object in pretending that they're not in me. And how can I feel inspired to go on and on for the sake of supporting the life that she leads? Oh, I don't want her to cease to exist. Oh, God! I don't mean that at all. I love her. And she loves me. But still—with all that—is life worth while just to keep this kind of existence going? Can it ever make me want to struggle through storms and blizzards, and break my shins clambering up cliff sides, just so that there should be more of this kind of life possible to her? . . .

He is picturing in his mind Judith going on from day to day—the central

interest of her life the cleanness of her house, the tidiness of it; having no time for anything but the house, the house, and putting it before other people's happiness.

And mother—going on and on, the pivot of her life her own safety, her own security, her own well-being.

. . . Ah—ah! he is sighing. There was a time when I thought Judith was a perfect wife, until I discovered that all she is is a perfect house-keeper. Mother—I used to look upon poor old mother as an ideal woman—all that is summed up in the word “mother,” quite beyond the reach of human frailty. But there's not much unselfishness or sense of sacrifice in mother. She isn't noble—she isn't heroic. She's wrapped up in herself. She's nervous—afraid. For that matter, I used to think when Dad was alive that our Marie was an oracle, before I saw through her—that she was just an old ignoramus. I remember when I used to think that women and girls were angels of purity; but, of course, I had to be disillusioned. There was a time when I thought of business as a gallant adventure, but it's only a dignified scramble. And there was always the idea hovering in the back of my mind that the Creator of the world must be only another name for what we call “good.” But how can that be? Put the idea to the test, and you see that “God” becomes “god,” and that that “god” must be what we call “evil” as much as he is what we call “good” . . .

He is moving his legs impatiently, and turning and lying on his back again. He is feeling very tired.

. . . Oh, for heaven's sake, am *I* any better myself? Am I any less imperfect than anybody else? Am I not impure? Am I not selfish and self-centred? Am I not sensual? And as much so as Nona and Judith and mother are these things? . . .

His eyes are looking at the increasing light of day against the curtains in front of the window, but his mind is going on:

. . . Oh, I can't define *myself*. I'm just something or somebody—going on and on. Ah, that's just it. You won't define yourself. Imbedded in your nature is the idea that *you* are beyond criticism, beyond reproach. You will not say so. You wouldn't ever recognise that element in yourself. But it's there. You won't look inwards. You are looking outwards—for an ideal. You are continually imagining that somebody is an ideal figure, and continually finding that you're under an illusion. But are *you* an ideal figure? Oh, I'm no ideal. If I was an ideal figure, I wouldn't be so disappointed in others. I'd be more forbearing, more tolerant, more understanding, more sympathetic. . . .

Slowly daylight is growing in the room. The light against the curtains is brighter. Not only can he see the silhouette of the bedposts and the oak

wood work between them at the foot of the bed, but there is the outline visible to him of the dressing table on one side of the room, and of the wardrobe on the other.

And while he is looking idly at these things, he is realizing that whereas he has in the past lost faith in others, he is now losing faith in himself. He is seeing himself with all the faults that he has seen in others. He is seeing himself being selfish when he is annoyed with mother for not lending him money that she does not want to lend him; being sensual when he has secretly been loving Miss Delaine; being impure when he has had thoughts of wanting women; being like Judith in making a scene because the house has not been dusted; being self-centred in not having seen himself so clearly before; and having in himself the elements of evil as well as good.

. . . Is there no ideal in the world that will not turn into an illusion? his mind is asking desperately. . . .

II. The Dawn

There is enough light in the room now for him to distinguish the extent of the dressing table mirror and of the mirror in the door of the wardrobe. He can see the faint shine of the glass in the frame of the picture of Babs beside the window. In the middle of the ceiling he can see the electric lamp suspended with the pale pink silk shade hanging over it.

For a while he is musing on his own shortcomings, and he is realizing how humiliatingly far he is from being what he feels is possible.

. . . Do we all fail to make the world a more beautiful place, he is thinking, because we're always looking to somebody else to be perfect? And yet how can the world be perfect if each one of us is not perfect? And if we want the world to be perfect, shouldn't we begin with ourselves? How can the world begin to be different if I don't begin? I'm part of the world, and if I change, the whole world is that much changed. . . .

There is a very serious expression on his face and he is frowning.

. . . All the time I'm thinking all this, he is musing perplexedly, I can feel that life of peace that I've felt before. During the last year or so it hasn't been something that's come and gone away again. It's been there all the time—whenever I've let myself sink into it. It doesn't press itself upon me. If I don't want it, I needn't have it. I can reject the feeling it gives me if I'm in that mood. But all the time it's there. I can't make it out. It puzzles me what it can be. But, oh God! it is beautiful. I just have to be quiet and think of that life and want it, and I can reach up into it. But it's not a movement that I make in space. I stay just where I am; but I feel different. Or is it that I let it come to me? I make it possible for it to come. It's life, that's what it

is. It isn't something that *is* alive. It isn't like some person who comes to you and you know he is alive. It isn't like that at all. This that I feel *is* life—life its very self. Life apart from a form, life without a body. That's why I don't see it, I suppose, because there's nothing to see. And nothing to hear, and nothing to smell, nothing that you can touch. All that happens is that I am conscious of it. That's all you can say. . . .

The pattern on the eider-down quilt is now perceptible, and his dressing-gown thrown over the end of the bed. He can discern the beading round the panels in the front of the wardrobe and the fretwork of its cornice. The shadows of the window frames are sharply defined against the curtains.

. . . It is just life, his thoughts are going on, life in all perfection. A great sea of life, unprisoned, unconfined. Yet not anything that is vague or unconscious. Conscious life. As conscious as any human person. I mean a life that is aware of everything. I feel that it is aware of me, knows me intimately: I feel that I can't hide anything in my life from it. It's a personal life, if you like. A great friend. But it isn't like the personal life of a human being. It isn't cramped, narrow, stunted, thwarted by a hundred thousand things that make us worried and irritable. It's life—free. It's *a* life that is free, if you like. It isn't struggling to become something. It *is*. It is its own glorious self. . . .

The worried expression is leaving his face as he is musing on, and he is relieved at finding expression for something that has caused him so much wondering.

. . . The thing is, it is a life real, stable, certain, reliable beyond all doubting, his mind is pursuing. It's hard to explain what there is about this life that makes me feel so sure of it: makes me feel that it can never fail me like human life has done. There's something inherent in it that makes it so. Certainty and reality are parts of its very essence. They are vital parts of it, so that it isn't possible to think of it in relation to anything that could ever fail or could ever prove an illusion. Life itself can't fail you. And this *is* life, pure, unfettered life. If it were an illusion, I feel that I would also be an illusion. It's like that. I am wrapped up in it. And yet can that mean that I'm part of it? Oh, how can that be? Because I'm not it. If I were that life, I would have infinite wisdom, which would induce a deep peace and an inexhaustible patience. If I were that life I would have infinite love for all life. There would be a shining purity in me. And there would be the willingness to sacrifice the very core of my consciousness if it seemed best, for the love that would be in me could hold nothing back. Yet there would be in me the truest humility, for the wisdom I would have would show me how tiny is one unit of life amid the totality of life, no matter how many smaller units seem below it. I am not anything like that. Yet there is the

feeling that it would be possible, if I tried, to bring more of that greatness of life into my littleness. There is the feeling that it isn't humanly impossible to help that great life to come into the world. Oh, God! if that life could be in me I would be sympathetic and understanding to every tiny thing, I would love intensely every human life and every creature in the world, but I would be wise in the way I showed that love, wise in my kindness, wise in my sympathy. I would raise up, and not pull down, I would help wherever I saw that help was needed, but I would help wisely and not pamper. I would rejoice at every gentle word spoken, and everything unkind would wound me. I would not be dissatisfied with the world and the people in it, because somehow I would understand that no life in the world is perfect and that human nature is but in a process of becoming. I would know that anything human has the element of potential failure in it and that we must not make idols of human beings—we shall always be disillusioned; but that we should put our faith in the unseen. . . .

There is light enough in the room for him to see everything, and through the semi-opacity of the window curtains he can gain a suggestion of the first beams of sunshine touching the veranda.

. . . In my heart of hearts, I know that nothing in the world will completely satisfy but the being of that great life. And nothing is worth while but trying to be it. If I could keep my little personal life centred in the bosom of that great life, I would be content. That life is here with me and I am here, and it all seems so easy to keep myself in that great life and always act in conformity with the feeling of it. But it isn't so easy, because I'm still afraid. It is so great and so wonderful, and I am so little. Yet it gives me every reason to feel confident of it. It can't fail me, because it is wisdom that I am trusting to, and love and truth. These things can't fail. By their very nature they can't fail. All that can happen is that we can fail to bring them completely into our lives. Human nature fails us because it manifests these qualities only sometimes. But this life that I feel *is* these very things. It is life, and *life is these things*. Take love and truth out of the world, and we would cease to be conscious. Love is the highest form of the great force of attraction, with its counter-part repulsion. And the whole world is a manifestation of attraction and repulsion. Without that force we should cease to be. Without truth there would be no reality. Without it we could never say that any one thing was truly that thing. The greatest truth is this reality of love. And from the working of that great force of love there is born wisdom. Life itself, in its very essence, is love and wisdom. How can I but trust implicitly love and wisdom? Love and wisdom are what this great life is that I feel—love and wisdom in limitless measure. . . .

As the sunshine is continuing to extend along the veranda, and the light

in the room to be brighter, a glow of happiness is possessing him, and the words are coming into his mind:

. . . Great life of love and wisdom, help me to become like you. Help me to see the world as you see it and to love it as you love it. Help me to be wise, as you are wise. Help me to sink my little wisdom into your great wisdom. And, oh, life, great Master Life, help me to understand! . . .
