

CHAPTER LXIII

Humphrey Trinder and Sir Otto Hudson made curious travelling-companions. They had hardly met more than twice in their lives, and now they were suddenly closeted together for two days in the intimacy of a Wagon-lit. Both had brought work with them — Humphrey some of his medical books and notebooks and Sir Otto a good deal of correspondence. When they spoke it would usually be to exchange a few words on the place through which they were passing or the travelling facilities of different companies and nations — subjects on which Sir Otto proved to be astonishingly well informed. He would talk for a few minutes — interestingly as always — and then relapse into the work he had been doing. And Humphrey, after gazing at him for an extra second or so with his eyes screwed up in his peculiar fashion, would also return to his reading.

The night which they passed in the train was, for Humphrey, a decidedly unpleasant one. Never having travelled in a sleeper, he had never before been physically comfortable enough in a train to sleep much. But now, lying in bed with his clothes off and every external circumstance provided for, he had nothing to do but listen to the clack and rattle of the wheels incorporating themselves into his brain. The more often he dozed, the more completely when he came to himself again, did he seem to have become a part of the machinery. At last, just as it was getting light, he heard a slight movement from the other bed, which showed him that Sir Otto was also awake, and thereupon made some impatient remark on the penetrating power of the incessant rattle. But Sir Otto, in a quiet voice which showed that he had been lying awake for a long time, only replied that he did not altogether dislike it. This annoyed Humphrey. He made no reply. Does the fellow like it so much that he keeps awake specially to enjoy it? he thought and, the next morning, when they got up, he noticed that his companion's smooth, regular, and rather expressionless features showed no traces of fatigue.

They arrived at Naples before it was light the second morning and, after listening in the lamplit emptiness of the big station to a chilly discussion in Italian between Sir Otto and a sleepy station official, most of which was totally incomprehensible to him, Humphrey found himself in the back seat of a comfortable limousine with Sir Otto in the opposite corner. They had some thirty miles to do, the swift southern dawn had already paled the sky by the time they started, and the whole drive through the sunrise was one of almost incredible beauty. On the left the sullen smoking cone of Vesuvius seemed to glide along silent and threatening beside them, while on the other side, they caught occasional vanishing glimpses of the Gulf of Naples. The smooth water lay like a single blue pearl in the morning sun, and once Sir Otto pointed out to Humphrey — a bright purple streak on the clear horizon — the island of Capri.

Lady Hudson, who let them in, at once explained the situation. Janet was upstairs with Margaret and John fast asleep in his room. She had wanted to relieve Janet herself, but Margaret would hardly let her sister-in-law out of her sight. Lady Hudson thought this must be because Janet had been there when she was first brought in; and since then Margaret had only been fully conscious at rare intervals. Sir Otto was to go up, but she would rather Humphrey did not go immediately — for

the patient had bad concussion, and quiet was everything. Humphrey asked after Merlin. "He's asleep on her bed!" replied Lady Hudson. "He took the journey like an angel!" It appeared that poor Margaret had started asking for Merlin soon after she was brought in — her father and Merlin — these were the two names she had repeated most often.

Humphrey could see that Lady Hudson was bitterly distressed because Margaret had not asked for her too; and he felt sorry for her. Sir Otto tip-toed upstairs. Humphrey, finding his way up to John's bedroom, where Lady Hudson had told him he was to sleep, saw his young brother lying prone on the bed, fast asleep, with his head resting face downwards on a crooked elbow. He looked at him for a few moments and then tiptoed out of the room and came downstairs again in the warm empty morning light. He sat in an armchair, stretched his long legs out, and closed his weary eyes.

He awoke again, when Janet and John came down, and Sir Otto also reappeared, having left his wife alone with Margaret.

"Well, what do you think?" John asked Humphrey eagerly, the moment they had greeted one another.

"I haven't seen her yet," replied Humphrey. John's face fell, and Humphrey gradually discovered, to his dismay, that his brother had been pinning immense hopes on his (Humphrey's) medical powers.

"Have you a good doctor?" he asked John.

"There's a man from Naples. He'll be here during the morning. Oh, Humphrey, it's ghastly having a foreigner!"

"Is he a wash-out?"

"No. I think he is good. Margaret seems to like him — but somehow — it's awful."

A dark-skinned Italian girl brought in some coffee and rolls and fruit, and while they ate a subdued breakfast, Janet explained to Humphrey in greater detail just what had happened. It appeared that Margaret had been in the habit of going regularly, at the same hour, every morning to a certain spot about half-a-mile away, where she was working at her picture. There were two ways — one through the village, and one, slightly shorter, by a footpath. Margaret invariably took the footpath. On the morning of the accident she had been knocked down by a lorry, which had got out of control, just as she was climbing the hill up from the village. No one knew why she had chosen the other way on that particular morning; for, as far as they were aware, she had no shopping to do — indeed, there was hardly a shop in the village.

This was also the first time Humphrey learnt that the concussion was not the only trouble. The great back wheel of the lorry had, it seemed, gone right over the portfolio in which she was carrying her picture and also, alas, over the hand and arm which had painted it, crushing all into a single mass of pulp. This was the worst complication. For the Italian doctor held that it was absolutely necessary to amputate at once — not later than that very morning. At the same time he could not, in the patient's present condition, answer for the effect.

Humphrey now found, to his still greater distress, that John had been building an elaborate edifice of hope on some vague idea he had that he,

(Humphrey) considered all surgical operations to be unnecessary. He had remembered, it seemed, the efforts which his brother had made to get Gerald's father to try non-operative treatment for his malignant growth and had confused this with the gangrene, of which the Italian doctor was afraid. The moment Humphrey saw the wound, he knew that it would inevitably gangrene, and must therefore be amputated. He told John as simply and kindly as he could and watched the poor fellow pathetically trying to hide his disappointment.

Two hours later the doctor arrived, with a surgeon. Humphrey, with Janet to interpret him, had a few words with both — enough to convince himself that they knew at any rate the elements of their business. It was all he could do, and he told John that the only possible course was to trust these men. John agreed. It was a hopeful sign that Margaret had seemed rather better since breakfast. She was lying now, propped up a little on her pillow, with the uninjured hand resting in her father's while the other in its huge ugly, square-toed splint occasionally just touched Merlin, who responded by purring furiously and kneading the woollen blanket about her breast with his grey paws.

The surgeon and the doctor entered. During the operation poor Merlin, dismissed from the room, wandered miserably about all over the house. He had only just fully realised that he was in that abomination of desolation to all respectable cats — a new place! Unfortunately, in spite of the forlorn miaulings with which he immediately published this discovery, everyone was too distracted to find and console him. Only when it was all over, and Margaret had come to again and asked almost immediately where he was, did they remember him. John ran out of the room and told Humphrey, who promptly began hunting all over the house. Merlin was nowhere to be found.

CHAPTER LXIV

It was impossible to conceal his absence from Margaret; for as soon as they began to make excuses and to explain the temporary delay in bringing him, she asked them straight out if he were not lost. They told her that Humphrey was out looking for him and that doubtless he had merely wandered a few steps away from the house. But as time went on and neither of them reappeared, she became agitated and the attempt to conceal this agitation brought on a headache which sent her temperature up and at last induced a state of semi-delirium. When Humphrey returned empty-handed, she was not sufficiently conscious to be apprised of the fact.

Margaret passed a bad night and the next morning, when they all hoped that her exhaustion might have made her forget about the cat, the first thing she was heard to murmur was something inaudible about 'vivisection.' At last the pitiful little frown of perplexity and dismay which had settled, as if for good, on her white face, drove John absolutely desperate. He announced his intention of spending the whole day, hunting high and low for Merlin, and left the house immediately after breakfast. Humphrey went with him. The latter's ignorance of Italian made it impossible for them to separate and beat up different quarters, but John was none the less extremely glad of his company.

John was miserably torn all day between his desire to find Merlin and his agony at being out of the house. At last, late in the afternoon they turned back, having tried every house in the village and questioned every peasant and peasant-woman they met, without result. Two or three of the peasants had however referred them with a significant shrug of the shoulders to a certain Villa Malfese, but had refused, with rustic caution, to explain what it was — information or the cat itself — which they might be expected to find there. On reflection John had been able to remember that the Villa Malfese was in fact a large house standing not very far off from their own villa, with extensive grounds covering part of the distance between. The grounds sloped away from the village and were so well-wooded that the villa was invisible. This was why they had not already tried it.

Before reaching home therefore, they went along to the Villa Malfese and, after looking sharply about them as they walked up the rather neglected private road which led to it, had knocked at the front door. It was a long time before they got any answer. Humphrey concluded that the house was empty, and they would actually have come away, had not John positively declared that he had heard a cat mew somewhere inside. He said he felt certain that there were people inside the house, who for some reason did not wish to come to the door. So they knocked again and again, until at last an ill-tempered man-servant opened to them and in reply to their questions assured them offhand that he knew nothing about any cat whatever. This time it was Humphrey who was not satisfied. He told John to ask if they could not see the master of the house and at the same time slipped a generous supply of lire into the man's hand. The fellow glanced down at the note and after a moment's hesitation handed it back to Humphrey with a surly shake of his head. He shut the door in their faces. They looked at each other and decided that for the moment, the best thing to do was to go home.

When they arrived back and describe what had happened, it turned out that Janet knew the Villa Malfese quite well — had even been inside it herself. The Italian Count, who owned it, was at present away. He had apparently been a friend of the old nobleman who used to own Dodge's villa, and Dodge himself had become acquainted with him while he was in Italy. When he was in residence, said Janet, this Malfi occasionally gave rather fantastic entertainments in his house and grounds, to which Dodge and his retinue were sometimes invited. "Mr. Metcalfe used to go regularly when he was here," she said. "I went once myself. They had the garden very prettily lit up. But I didn't like the people. Next time they asked me I refused."

"What sort of people were they?" enquired John.

"Oh, quite harmless, I dare say, really. Only very rich and expensively dressed. They danced a lot in the evenings. I didn't like their faces, though."

"You say he's away from home now?" said Humphrey.

"Yes."

"I suppose the home really is empty then — and that fellow was just a caretaker."

"No," said Janet. "A party of people arrived just before the accident. Laretta told me about them. A lot of men — she even says there's an *Inglese* among them. But I didn't take much notice of that, because her ideas of an '*Inglese*' are distinctly crude! I haven't seen anything of them myself. I've hardly been outside the house."

They're Signor Malfi's friends, I expect. They do sometimes come when he's away." Nobody spoke.

"Why!" added Janet, suddenly recollecting it: "there is a cat there. I remember now." John's face fell:

"Then perhaps it wasn't Merlin!" But Humphrey brightened up:

"Male or female?" he enquired briskly.

"I'm not sure. It's a smallish sized one."

"Probably female," said Humphrey. He turned to John, raised his eyebrows, and nodded:

"We'll pop along back this afternoon, Squire, and see if we can get permission to search those grounds. And if we can't get permission we'll do without it!"

"Did Mr. Dodge just go to parties there, or did he ever go at other times?" asked Sir Otto casually.

"I rather think he went alone once or twice, to see Signor Malfi," said Janet. Sir Otto nodded.

"I don't think I should go, if I were you," he said calmly to John and Humphrey. "The chances against your finding Merlin there are heavy. It's hardly worth while." John looked at his father-in-law.

"But I actually heard him! I'm almost certain it was Merlin's mew."

"Ah, it's rather easy to hear what you are listening for, John! You see, Janet says there's another cat."

"That's just why I think we may find Merlin there, Sir," explained Humphrey.

Suddenly all John's suspicion of Sir Otto, and the distrust and dislike which were growing from it, flamed up.

"Well, will you help us find him, Sir?" he said, and the moment he began speaking, something prompted him to put into his voice and manner a peculiar angry significance.

"I wish I could, John." There was silence. John seemed to be waiting for him to go on. But he would not add anything. And then John spoke again, suddenly and savagely:

"Margaret's dying!" he said, and stared at his father-in-law with an expression between sternness and despair. Sir Otto looked back at him strangely, a little uneasily, and made no answer. And John left the room abruptly and went up to see Margaret, whom he found in tears, since, in her weak condition, the disappointment of their failure had been too much for her.

Now, just as John left the room, there came into Sir Otto's memory some words — three Latin words — which his father-in-law had once mentioned to him in a certain private conversation — adding that he was never to repeat them without permission to a living soul. He sat absolutely still for five minutes, thinking of these words, thinking of his father-in-law, thinking of Margaret, and at the end of that time Janet rose to follow John upstairs. A few minutes after she had left the room Sir Otto, with considerable uneasiness and hesitation, gave Humphrey some advice about the Villa Malfese and eventually repeated to him the three Latin words.

"I don't know," he added. "They might help. Dodge was never exactly a reliable character. But of course there may be nothing in it at all." Humphrey thanked him profusely.

“Better not say anything to John!” he added. And at the same moment John opened the door and put his head in without looking at Sir Otto.

“Well, are you ready, Hump?”

“Come along!” Humphrey jumped up and joined him. They left the house together.

Part of the way, they had to walk alongside the grounds of the Villa Malfese. They came to a door in the wall, which Humphrey tried, to see if it would open. To their surprise, it did and, in spite of all that was on their minds, they both exclaimed at the marvellous beauty of the glimpse which they saw through the opening. The cypresses stood about on the sloping lawns like incarnate shadows, and far away in the background, framed exactly in the aperture of the doorway, arose once more the smoking cone of Vesuvius. For a long time they both stood gazing, forgetful of everything.

“Oh, let’s chance it!” cried John at last, “and go straight in and hunt for him in the grounds!”

“No,” said Humphrey. “We’d better go up to the house first. After all, you yourself said you heard him there!” John came to himself with a sense of shame.

“Yes, of course!” he agreed, and they shut the little door and went on to the house.

This time the door was opened with less delay. But the man seemed even less inclined than he had been before to admit them. He was evidently annoyed with them for returning.

“We must see the Signor — whoever he is — at once!” John explained recklessly and at the same time Humphrey slipped three times the morning’s bribe into his hand. The man-servant, after some hesitation, shrugged his shoulders, admitted them, closed the door, gave them some voluble directions, the gist of which John just managed to catch, and shuffled off.

Humphrey and John looked round the large vestibule curiously. The house had a musty smell, as if for a long time it had not been fully opened up, and a good deal of the furniture was shrouded up in white dust-sheets. Something induced them both to talk on tiptoe, as they made their way through the vestibule and along a passage to some steps which led down below the ground level. At the bottom of the steps there was another passage, dimly lit, and having on one of its walls a large fresco, which the damp had greatly disfigured. They looked at it as well as they could in the dim light and saw that it represented a severed human head lying face upward on a dish. John heard Humphrey catch his breath in a peculiar way and, looking at them, saw that he had turned white.

“What is it?” he whispered. Humphrey pointed to the fresco, and then, putting his mouth so close to his brother’s ear that the little stream of breath tickled him:

“It may mean,” he whispered, “— worse things than vivisection!” John looked at him in amazement. Didn’t he even know that the life of John the Baptist was a favourite subject with the Italian painters?

They went on along the passage, till they found themselves opposite a heavy door that looked as if it might lead to a cellar or an armoury. It was apparently painted a dull grey colour.

"This must be the door he meant!" whispered John. Humphrey immediately struck on it with his knuckles. They scarcely made a sound. He turned to John and soundlessly framed with his lips the single word:

"Lead!" Then he took out a penknife and was about to tap with the butt of it, when John touched his arm.

"Do you think it's safe to go on?" he whispered. Humphrey turned suddenly. John saw now that his eyes were sparkling with furious excitement. He seemed to hesitate for a moment, but only to find some means of heartening his timid brother. At last he framed with his lips the word:

"Margaret!"

"Go on!" said John's lips, and Humphrey tapped at the door. They listened for what seemed an age, aware of their own breathing, and of the beating of their hearts. Was there to be no answer? And then suddenly Humphrey jumped nearly out of his skin, as a sharp whisper came right in his ear:

"Chi?"

It seemed to issue from the wall itself. But Humphrey perceived at length that there was a tiny tube-like opening in it just near the door. Hardly aware of what he was doing, he put his mouth to the opening and whispered back into it — the three Latin words which Sir Otto had repeated to him.

There was a grinding and grating noise which seemed, owing to the thickness and mass of the door, to come from a long way off. And then it swung slowly and silently inwards on its hinges. and the first thing John became aware of was a smell, which redoubled his dreamlike sense of the unreality of all that had happened since the porter let them in, by taking him right back to the interior of the little church at Onslow. It was incense.

He stared stupidly in. For the first moment he thought he was looking into an enormous dark open space, some underground cavern perhaps, but almost immediately he perceived that his unaccustomed eyes had been mistaken and it was in fact a comparatively narrow, though long, room hung from top to bottom with plain black curtains. Against the far wall, with their faces to the door, stood a group of men, arranged in a sort of crescent formation about a table. It was difficult to see their faces. On the table was a small charcoal brazier, which diffused its fiery glow, on one side, over a few tools that looked like surgical instruments and on the other, over a stout, heavy board, to the upper side of which some soft grey object was tightly strapped.

Looking back on it afterwards, John was never absolutely certain what happened next. For, from the moment when the pungent aroma entered his nostrils, he had passed into that old strange certainty that everything had happened before. Time tottered for an instant, like a building shaken by an earthquake, and he no longer knew whether he had already noticed, or whether he would notice, that at one of the tips of the crescent, his face just enough lit by the brazier to be recognizable, stood no other person than Francis Leslie Dawson. He did not know whether it was now, or ages and ages ago, that he had seen Humphrey glide into that room like a somnambulist and straight up to the little table in the centre of the crescent.

Swaying slightly from the hips, as if he were balancing on a tight-rope, with shining eyes and a curious set smile on his lips, Humphrey had walked up to the table through the deathly silence. He himself no longer knew if he were asleep or awake. For he felt that as soon as he became wholly one or the other, everything would break; the spell-bound group of men would be released to pounce on him. Perhaps he would even fall — lose his balance — before they reached him!

He reached the table, he picked up the heavy board, he turned, and walked with the same springing step back to the door. And only when he reached it, did he come fully to himself. Wide awake now, he turned once more, shook his fist fiercely at the group of men, slammed the door to, and, together with John, bolted along the passage, up the stairs, and out of the house. The clang of the door was the first thing to break the silence in which everything had occurred.

Not till they were in sight of their own villa did they pause to unstrap a pitilessly gagged Merlin.

“Gag first, straps next!” said Humphrey briefly, and when the violent nervous tremblings began John understood why he had prescribed this order. Yet Merlin was apparently quite unhurt and they only had to wait a few minutes till he calmed down enough to be carried.

“We must go straight to the police,” said Humphrey.

“I’m going back with Merlin first!” said John.

“Very well,” said Humphrey. “You go back and I’ll go and hunt up the police alone. What’s the Italian for policeman?”

“That’ll be just the trouble!” said John. “There’s nothing that quite corresponds.” He looked at Humphrey, who had suddenly put his hand to his head. John noticed that his brother’s face was still terribly white.

“I think perhaps —” said Humphrey vaguely, “I’ll come back with you after all, Squire. An hour or so’s delay isn’t going to make much odds — and I should only muddle it probably, without any Italian.” He took the board and straps under one arm and put the other through John’s. They said nothing more to each other of what had happened, and as they went on, Humphrey began to lean on John more and more heavily. With the not inconsiderable weight of Merlin on one arm and Humphrey leaning on the other, John was pretty glad when they reached home. He hurried upstairs to Margaret with the cat, while Humphrey, crawling with the utmost difficulty to his bedroom had just time to fling himself on his back on the bed before going off into a dead faint. It was not till some days later that John discovered his brother had never seen Dawson at all.

CHAPTER LXV

The day after he bought the Novalis was spent by Gerald in a strange, half exalted, half incredulous, state of mind. Unwilling to deceive himself, he tried to look at the affair from the most matter-of-fact point of view, comparing it with other literary intoxications he had experienced in his time, and telling himself that the effect would wear off in a few days. But it was no use. The inner voice refused to be silent and towards evening the conviction that something lasting had indeed happened to him was too strong to be any longer denied. All through the next two days, while he

applied himself, as best he might, to the interviewing of hopeful customers or the composition of snappy panegyrics on rubber and hardware, the same inner voice would keep breaking out into such paeans of triumph as he found positively disturbing.

The principal burden of these private and noiseless hymns remained the same; the voice sang to him how his particular Caliban was now finally vanquished, the conspiracy detected and smashed for ever. Henceforth the monster would not merely cease to threaten but, like a good monster, would hew wood and draw water for his noble master. Not only that, not only would he fetch in firing at requiring, but (and it was this that drew the subtle little creases to the corners of Gerald's mouth, as he sat in the Underground staring brightly at the advertisements on the fanlight opposite) not only that but, from now on, whether he liked it or no, an honest, reformed Caliban (though still none the less a real Caliban — very much alive and kicking!) would be obliged to show him all the springs and freshets of the isle, to take him humbly over every fertile inch of it, till, drinking and gazing his fill, he had fairly surfeited himself with joy.

The same night, Gerald awoke in the early hours from a remarkable dream about Margaret Trinder — or, stop, was it Janet? As he lay on his back, trying to recollect more of this dream, he gradually realised that he actually could not tell which it had been. It was either, or both. And then, as not so much the details but the mood of the dream came back to him, he became aware that other women had been there too — his mother and — strangest of all — his first love. He suddenly saw that he would never be able to tell this dream to anyone.

Soon, as he lay there perfectly still in his bed, Gerald became filled with a tremendous happiness — a happiness so powerful that it seemed to throb out into the room and pack all the empty space between his bed and the walls. And then, gradually, into this great enveloping ocean of happiness there began to trickle something else. The something was fear. And the rapid transformation to fear was the more remarkable because at first those powerful surging waves of happiness, which were filling empty space in such a peculiar way, seemed to make fear literally impossible; for was it not just the emptiness of which he had always been afraid — always, ever since he was a tiny boy! And now — he himself was apparently filling that emptiness! But then, quite suddenly, the opposite notion came to him. Perhaps these same strange waves (for how else could one describe them?) of happiness were actually providing a sort of elastic medium — a medium on which — in which He would be able to come gliding up to the bed!

Yes — it would be an hallucination — and how much would that help?

Who was He? It had been a rule in Gerald's home, when he was a child, that on Sundays no one must read anything but the Bible. A single exception, however, had been made of a large illustrated Shakespeare, over which little Gerald had used to pore for hours on end — simply because there was nothing else to do. Among the illustrations in this book there had been one of Hamlet, and the artist had chosen the scene in the closet with his mother, where the ghost of old Hamlet appears to Hamlet, whose 'bedded hair, like life in excrements, starts up and stands on end.' Underneath this picture stood the quotation:

Look you, how pale he glares!

words which had long ago become a part of Gerald's waking dream, or rather nightmares. So integral a part of them that he could still hardly see the word 'glare' printed on a page — no matter in what context — without a faint shudder. He, then, was this armed and staring ghost — the old man — the old man who would come in by himself in the middle of the night!

Gerald set his teeth and summoned, as he had so often done before on similar occasions, all his scepticism and common sense; and they availed — as always — nothing. And then, bethinking himself of a new remedy, he suddenly flung himself with an impulse of absolute self-surrender on to — on to that crimson blaze in his heart, from which the scorpion blackness and sting of lust had recently in some strange manner been withdrawn. And insensibly, as he did this, his mood changed. He realised quite clearly that the old man was no empty fancy. He was there, and had always been there, waiting, just beyond the fringe of hallucination. It was with good reason that the little boy had lain trembling in the darkness, trembling before his own fantastic, but not untrue, embodiment of the appalling abyss of moral weakness into which his destiny made him liable to fall. It was with good reason that the grown man had been made to tremble still. Was there nothing, then, to tremble at? And yet, with this same humiliating thought, there came flooding in upon him the blinding truth that the terrible old man, too, was after all — himself! So that was it! Ah! Suddenly, and for the briefest instant, he himself became old and terrible — full of hate. He glared ferociously into the darkness, and his breast heaved with the force of its cruel vindictive will to crush, to terrify, to annihilate a certain paltry tremulous guilt-laden weakling, whose name was Gerald Marston, to crush, to terrify, to annihilate him, until — until he should have become once more — what he ought always to have been!

It only lasted a moment and when it went, it left him exhausted. He strove to recover it and, when it failed, found himself almost hoping, in spite of a simultaneous apprehension, that the old man would actually appear as an hallucination. For then he would either go mad or recover that tremendous experience — and he felt now that he had enough love in him not to go mad. The old man did not appear.

About an hour after it was light Gerald fell into a deep dreamless sleep, and, when his alarm-clock roused him at half-past seven, he was extremely annoyed. Somehow or other he managed to fall out of bed, struggle into his clothes and get himself some breakfast, but life appeared a dismal affair to his half sleepless eyes. He looked out at the rainy sky and wondered — lonely and tired — how he should ever get through another day of this awful work. At last, when he had to return to his bedroom, just before leaving for the office, forlornness and fatigue combining together drew him suddenly into an attitude which he had not adopted since he was eighteen. Sinking on his knees against the bed and burying his head in his hands he prayed — but to whom? He hardly knew if it were not his first love.

Rising a few minutes later, he hunted quickly about for a piece of notepaper, on which he proceeded to write rapidly for a minute or two without stopping. Then he looked at his watch and, stuffing the piece of notepaper into a desk, hurried off to

the Underground. When he returned home at night, he went straight to the desk and read what he had written:

Hers is a soft and tender face, half lost in a mist of fine-spun hair like the rays of the morning sun; lips for ever quivering into the "O" that challenges another kiss; eyes that burn and burn and burn, only never with anger or resentment. Already she comes to me every night, or she beckons me to her side, weary with working for her all day. How can I describe what I feel as this heavy head sinks between her golden ripening breasts into — oblivion! Ah no, rather the reckless repose of excessive joy — luxury that must keep moving, sighing, playfully exploring, to remind itself of the inexhaustible wealth of love that is its living couch! Already she comes to me every night — and even so desire is not satisfied, but I must yearn painfully, painfully after the wedding-day! How long have we to wait? I cannot tell — days — months — years; but this I know, that sooner or later that marvellous morning will awaken us, and that when it comes, however late, my darling will be every whit as young and fair and kind to me as she was last night. My darling, oh, my darling! Already in fancy I see the glorious hour! The horses and carriages, the guests, the slow procession to the Church!

Slow indeed! And what manner of wedding-guests are these, pray? What are all these tears, these black garments, this solemn music?

Forgive them, Sir! Pity them rather! Think you their blindness can clip our beating wings of light?

Nevertheless — it is a strange wedding! Forgive me — may I ask, then, Sir — the Bride's name?

It was Sleep, Sir, till she changed it to-day!

Gerald, twisting the piece of notepaper between his fingers, looked at it uneasily. There was something he did not wholly like about it. The thing seemed to be alive — and yet, as if it did not quite belong to him — like a changeling!

CHAPTER LXVI

When Humphrey began to come to himself, from his fainting fit, he found John, who had just come from Margaret, waiting in the room. John thought he was simply asleep. He was impatient to talk and could hardly wait till his brother was fully conscious.

"You should have seen her face!" Humphrey heard him saying. "You wouldn't believe the difference! Hump, I think she'll pull along pretty quickly now, don't you?"

Humphrey felt hideously weak and giddy. He was trying to remember something — a lot of things — Good lord! hundreds of things!

"Eh-h-h?" he said heavily, blinking his eyes stupidly at his brother.

"Margaret —" repeated John impatiently — "she'll get right again quickly, now that she's got Merlin back — and the operation's over — don't you think?" Humphrey suddenly sat bolt upright on the bed and stared at John with unseeing eyes.

"Margaret will get all right," he repeated vaguely, and then his eyes suddenly altered their focus and gazed intelligently into John's. He looked sheepish.

"I — I really don't know," he said.

"No — but you think so?" Humphrey stammered in an awkward, preoccupied way:

"I — no, I can't say I think so." John looked at his brother now with something approaching anger. He had spoken in such a strange, almost indifferent way! But at last Humphrey began to realise something of what he was feeling. He smiled at John and spoke more warmly:

"After all, the thing is to do everything we can, Squire, isn't it? Shall I go and see her?" John nodded eagerly, and they left the room together.

Since Merlin had been brought back to her, Margaret had been lying still in bed in a most tranquil and contented frame of mind. She was not troubling herself about the loss of her hand, further than the minor discomforts of tingling fingers, which, since they were not there, could not be eased by rubbing. As she carefully stroked Merlin's glossy and rumbling chin with her left hand, she had a delightful illusion of being spirited away from this foreign country — such a strange place to be ill in, but they had told her she could not be moved! — away from there and back to England, back to Klosters itself; for was not Merlin, all greyness and blueness and friendliness and smooth grace, like a little Klosters in himself? That was partly why she had wanted him.

The only thing that seriously marred her tranquility was a curious object — rather like a slab of black marble — which was apparently resting on her head. Sometimes it weighed more heavily, pressing so hard on her eyes, as to obscure the upper part of her vision altogether; and then it made her head ache terribly.

She felt pleasantly absolved from all responsibility about talking to people, for the one thing they kept on telling her was not to bother and not to talk. She just murmured something unintelligible, therefore, when Humphrey, coming in with John, looked at her in a curious scared way and almost immediately — so it seemed — tiptoed out again. John was gone, too. Janet was there; she was there all the time. Now Janet was gone. Her father and step-mother were there. John and Humphrey were back again. She heard the words 'police' and 'carabinieri' murmured once or twice, and wondered what they were talking about. It didn't matter. She needn't do anything.

Apparently it was quite late at night, for everything was so quiet in the room and there was no light behind the curtains. Had they all gone? No; somebody was there, for she heard a movement. Who was it? She wouldn't bother to find out. Perhaps it was early morning. It was odd how her memory kept returning to that evening with her mother, watching the birds feeding. At least it wouldn't matter so much remembering it, if she could only get it straight in her head. Was she afraid of their settling or of their not settling? That was the question she couldn't decide; and she had a dim notion that, whichever it was she was afraid of, she ought really to be afraid of the other. Ah! Got it! It was quite definitely their settling she was afraid of. There they all were, flitting about in the clear evening sky as if they were part of it — but the ground far down below, that was all black. She couldn't see it at all. She didn't want them to settle, because, if they did, they might never rise again. Merlin

might get them. No. That was wrong, it wasn't the ground that was black, it was the slab resting on her head, or perhaps the slab was the ground — but then she must be standing on her head! Perhaps that was why it hurt so!

Somebody — several people — came into the room and whispered something about breakfast. What did they want with breakfast? The point was that, if the birds actually settled, the two blacknesses would meet, the upper one and the lower one, and then where would she be? They didn't seem to realise that. There wouldn't be room. That was why she didn't want them to settle. Shoo! Clap!

But they were settling all the same. One after another, one after another, wheeling down through the twilight, dropping like autumn leaves. It was no earthly use trying to stop them. Now they were nearly all gone. The sky was empty. She couldn't see any at all. Why was it so dark at breakfast time? Yes, look, there they are far down below on the ground in a ring and Merlin isn't there and a man with a marvellous face has gone into the ring and is feeding them with flames. Then it wasn't quite dark on the ground! Those little flames! Whew! She would have to explain something to John — quickly. John! Where are you? Yes, he is there. This is his hand. John — She gripped the hand as hard as she possibly could and murmured just audibly:

“I understand . . . your light.”

Thanks goodness she had managed to get it said. Happiness! Full musical chords of it flowing through her! They had to do with the face of the man feeding the birds. Thank goodness she had managed to speak. John is near — near! And the other — who is it? Fancy! little Gerald — no, not little — bigger than myself! So that was what it had all meant! How she loved them! How she loved, loved, loved them both — all! Suddenly the glow of tender happiness, in which she lay, seemed to increase tenfold. Her heart filled with heavenly warmth and at the same instant with black terror. John and the baby rushed back, infinitely remote — non-existent. — for she herself was everywhere and alone. Her brain and blood roared with excess of life. All thought was rapidly becoming impossible. She had been caught up from above and was being rushed through space at enormous speed, not in one particular direction, but in all directions — outward. Like a frightened child she clung on tight to the skirts of the being who was hurrying her through space. Trust him! The only hope! All thought was becoming impossible. But she struggled terribly to go on thinking the one thought — feeling the one feeling — with Him!

CHAPTER LXVIII

[Note: Chapter LXVII heading not used by Barfield.]

Immediately after Margaret's funeral, which took place in the little village chapel on the afternoon of the following day, the Hudsons returned to England. But John and Humphrey stayed on a few days, in order to try and interest the Neapolitan police in the Villa Malfese. Together they interviewed a string of magnificently polite officials — Humphrey deposing and John, who lacked energy, interpreting for him. Followed a tiresome week of waiting, with nothing particular to do, since Humphrey had not brought enough books with him to occupy more than a few hours a day, and most of Margaret's letters and papers, which John would have to go through, were in

England. At the end of this week Humphrey received a letter — brief, but unconquerably polite — from the Neopolitan constabulary, advising the Signor and his brother to leave the neighbourhood at their earliest convenience. The Villa Malfese was not even mentioned.

The same evening they held a consultation with Janet and decided, in spite of their amazement and disgust, that the only possible course open to them in the circumstances was for all three to depart. Janet had been anxious in any case to throw up her appointment with Dodge, whose motives and policy she was coming to distrust more and more every day. Although her name was not actually mentioned in the letter, it provided her with ample excuse for leaving him at short notice. In any case, Humphrey insisted that he should positively decline to leave the country without her. As to Dodge's villa, everything was perfectly in order, and it simply meant leaving the place in the hands of a thoroughly reliable major domo.

The following day, therefore, they all left Luci together. Owing to a call which Humphrey wished to make, they travelled back to England via Lausanne, though this involved a long wait on and about the station for John and Janet, who did not intend entrusting Merlin to the cloak-room officials. Arriving at Lausanne about tea-time, they descended from the train and made their way into the enormous station restaurant. Humphrey, who was in front, carrying the round basket with Merlin in it under his arm, found a table at the side of the room and sat down with his back to the wall. Janet took her place between them and John sat opposite, facing the wall. Soon after they were seated, the latter observed without much interest a surprised, recognising look light up in the faces of both brother and sister. Neither of them spoke. After a while Janet flushed a deep red, and the expression on her face grew more and more intense, while Humphrey's eyebrows rose and he smiled in a signalling way, which showed that someone was approaching. John did not look round to see what was happening, nor did he start, when a hand touched him on the shoulder and he heard, greeting him, Metcalfe's voice. He rose, however, and shook hands, wondering vaguely how Humphrey came to know Metcalfe, who immediately proceeded to introduce both himself and Janet to his wife, a handsome fashionably dressed lady whom John had never met before, and of whom Metcalfe was obviously proud.

"Let me see, have you two met before?" said Janet, looking at Humphrey and Metcalfe, and Humphrey screwed up his eyes.

"I saw you at —" he began and then stopped. "No!" he said, "I don't think do." He had been going to say — "at this fellow's wedding," indicating John.

"My other brother, Humphrey," said Janet. And Humphrey shook hands first with Metcalfe and then with his wife without saying anything to indicate that he had ever known the latter by her maiden-name of Cranage. They smiled at each other, as two people ordinarily do smile, when they are first introduced.

Metcalfe and Adela, who had already finished their meal, sat down for a few minutes beside the Trinders. It appeared they were just finishing their honeymoon, after which they were going on to Lucerne, where Metcalfe had a new appointment in connection with the establishment of an International Bank. It had been talked of a good deal in the papers and great things were hoped of it, leading eventually to the total abolition of distinctive national currencies.

It was on hearing this news that John first woke out of his lethargy and into a kind of dismay.

“You in the International Bank!” he exclaimed.

“Not in it!” smiled Metcalfe. “I’m on the diplomatic staff.” And he explained how the setting up of the Bank involved a great deal of diplomatic activity — notably the difficult business of convincing smaller countries that affiliation would be to their advantage.

“Do you find it quite easy to persuade them?” asked John with more interest than he had yet displayed. Sitting greatly at his ease at the head of the table, Metcalfe now became aware for the first time that both John and Janet were looking at him very hard. This made him smile all the more winningly into the empty air, as he remarked that, as a matter of fact, it was quite surprising how reluctant many of them still were to “come in.”

“I should have thought —” began John, and again he looked at Metcalfe. “Oh, it doesn’t matter!” he finished. And then there was silence for a few moments, until John, rousing himself with a great effort to remember some of the things that had gone before, practically made himself say to Metcalfe.

“Do you remember, just before the Election — you promised to explain the details of that business between Dodge and Streeter?” Metcalfe nodded. He looked at John rather awkwardly and, among much else that he felt, felt sorry for him.

“I tell you what,” he said rather kindly, “I have to go round to the Consulate. Would you care to walk along with me? Your train goes after ours, I believe.”

“Yes, a long time after!” said Humphrey. But Janet, who had also been looking at John, turned to him:

“You go, Humphrey!” she said. “You’re going out anyhow. John’s tired. You can tell him afterwards.”

John threw her a grateful look, but nevertheless rose to his feet:

“No,” he said, “I should like to go.”

“I shall be back in twenty minutes,” said Metcalfe to Adela, and the two men disappeared together through the swinging glass doors.

For some time nobody at the table spoke. Janet, with her eyes on the door through which Metcalfe had disappeared, looked worried and anxious. Her face had not yet lost the heightened colour it had taken when she first saw him. Adela leaned back in her chair and lit a cigarette. Humphrey looked from one woman to the other with a vague smile, as much as to say: ‘Well, here we are together, eh what?’ Until at last an idea struck him.

“Janet, old thing,” he said, “let’s show Mrs. Metcalfe the cat. I believe she’d simply love him!”

“Good God!” exclaimed Adela, “do you people go about Europe with cats!”

“Not in the ordinary way!” And Humphrey explained for the first time the circumstances of their visit and of Margaret’s death.

“You poor unfortunates!” Adela exclaimed, looking from one to the other, “you must have been having a simply appalling time.” And when neither of them replied, she looked at Janet in a slightly embarrassed way: “What can one say in these cases?” she added. Janet suddenly smiled.

"Nothing!" she said, and began undoing Merlin's basket. Adela immediately went into raptures over him, she took him into her lap, where he stretched his poor legs, and looked up at her with a luxurious yawn, while she stroked him affectionately. Then she poured some milk into a saucer and lifted it carefully down on to her expensive silk skirt. Merlin immediately began lapping the milk, and when his eager tongue spotted the skirt with two or three white flecks, she took her handbag from the table and putting it on her lap beside him began to hunt for her handkerchief. All of a sudden Merlin became violently restive and, wriggling out of all her efforts to hold and pacify him, slipped down on to the floor with a mournful yowl. She just managed to save the remains of the milk.

Adela picked him up again and tried to soothe him with strokings, but nothing would now induce him to settle down again. At last Janet picked him up and put him on her own lap, where he immediately settled comfortably and began purring like a motor-car.

"What a temperamental beast!" exclaimed Mrs. Metcalfe. But Humphrey, who had been watching the scene silently with slightly screwed up eyes, said:

"It's something to do with your extremely smart handbag, I fancy!" She put the reticule on the table and held out her hands for Merlin once again. Rather reluctantly Janet handed him over, and this time he snuggled down into his new quarters at once. Adela looked at Humphrey and laughed:

"Holmes," she said, "your methods astonish me! Why should he dislike it?"

"I don't know!" said Humphrey, "what is it made of?"

"Oh well, yes, I see," said Adela, "it's one of the new unborn calf-skin ones. Fancy its having that effect on you, Merlin, you fastidious old gentleman!" Yet she appeared to be rather pleased and tickled him under the chin more affectionately than ever.

"By Jove!" said Humphrey, looking at his watch. "I must get along, if I'm going to get back in time for the train. He glanced at Janet. "John'll be back in a few minutes!" he said. Then he turned and shook hands with Adela.

"Goodbye." He looked into her eyes and thought of Gerald.

"Goodbye." She looked back into his, and thought of herself. They watched him stride across the restaurant and out through the door.

"How do you two come to know each other?" asked Janet, the moment the door had ceased oscillating behind him. Adela gave her a swift look, wondering how much she knew, or had guessed.

"Oh, we met a long time ago," and she mentioned a date, that reminded Janet of all that unhappy period of John's wedding. She even recollected Humphrey's visit to the Boarding-house with Gerald, on that day when she had picked the hair off his coat, and found that she still remembered vividly the exact shade of the hair. She looked at Adela's and saw that it was the same. In the twinkling of an eye she had realised much and guessed more. Adela turned her head. Their eyes met. For an instant Janet felt a thrilling wave of excitement and of power surge up in her, as all that she had in common with the other woman came sparkling up into her eyes and out of them and across to her in a kind of silent salute. Her cheeks and breast rose slightly, while her breath caught once and then came deep and full and slow. But — Metcalfe!

The two women began to discuss the relative advantages of Switzerland and Italy for a summer holiday.

CHAPTER LXIX

"Well, it defeats me altogether," said Gerald the first night he and Humphrey were alone together after the latter's return. "I always considered Dawson to be not much more than a conceited ass!"

"Nor he was," said Humphrey quickly, "when we first knew him."

"But why should he want to take up this —" Gerald paused, seeking for a word.

"He's changed," said Humphrey, "like all of us. That's just the point about human consciousness. It can't stand still. It's like a tissue. Either it grows in the right direction or it grows in the wrong. You can't just stop where you are. No one can.

"But what are they after?" Humphrey stared at him significantly.

"I told you I fainted after I got back?"

"Yes."

"Well —" he paused and looked at Gerald again — "you've heard that there are other ways of getting the — the sort of thing Brockmann wants us to get?"

"Only vaguely."

He spoke to him for a minute in a low earnest voice.

"Oh my God!" exclaimed Gerald, as he ceased.

"Yes. I know. But it's no use funking. You may as well know."

"I don't think I was funking — just at the moment. Not in the way you mean." Gerald paused. "I only felt suddenly appalled at the way it seems to crop up over and over again, wherever you look."

"What?"

"This awful problem of Egoism. Everywhere one looks. Above all in oneself."

"Ah!" said Humphrey. "But surely," he added, "you have no special cause to worry yourself about it."

"I?" said Gerald. "No cause! Why, I thought I must have positively bored you with my attempts to explain how deep it goes!" And he voiced once again that torturing suspicion that in some unimaginable depths he had always, ever since he was no more than a boy, been more concerned with his own feelings than with the objects of them.

"And yet," said Humphrey, "if I remember right, you got very angry with Goethe on just those grounds — only especially about women."

"Oh, especially about women, of course," said Gerald bitterly. "but only 'especially'; it's only a difference of degree. And the fact that Goethe was a bounder doesn't make me any the less one." He began to be sarcastic. "Not to mention the fact that there are a few small trifles on the other side of the account, in which Goethe and I are not altogether similar."

"After all," said Humphrey, "aren't we all in the same boat? Even John told me — of course he was desperately cut up, poor chap — the same story about Margaret the day after she died. Said he had never got near her at all, he said he had never really tried to till just at the end. Poor devil!" Humphrey lost himself for a moment in

the recollection. "And then it was too late! Apparently the very last thing she said to him was that she couldn't stand something about him. 'I can't stand your light!' or something like that. He was the only person who heard it. She called him up specially to say it. He was practically raving when he told me!" There was a pause.

"Did John really say that about Margaret?" asked Gerald at last. Humphrey nodded and for two or three minutes neither of them spoke again. And then:

"As far as what is generally called 'passion' is concerned," began Gerald softly, "I should once have agreed with you entirely — that we are all in the same boat. It used to be a kind of axiom with me that, if one felt for a woman in that way, she must always be at any given moment either an instrument of pleasure or a sort of Platonic symbol of one's own higher self — so that either way one never got at the woman herself at all!"

"Quite!" exclaimed Humphrey. "Didn't some Johnny or other say 'the woman always pays' or something of that kind?"

"Probably!" said Gerald gravely. "But I don't believe it. I strongly suspect the woman does just the same thing all the time, in her own particular way. Only — she probably has less chance of finding it out. But that's by the way. The point is, I have had to modify the whole idea recently, owing to — experience!"

"Ah! Adela!" said Humphrey. Gerald looked up with a smile, in which the courage pleased and charmed his companion.

"No. As a matter of fact I wasn't thinking of her at all. I don't know about that — yet. Humphrey, it is desperate, how mixed up everything is. What made me change my opinion was those few days at Klosters." He paused. "I suppose," he said thoughtfully, "there is no harm in my telling you now." And he went on a little haltingly to try and give Humphrey some idea of the powerful sense of companionship, together with undisguised admiration of her womanhood, which he had felt during those few days with Margaret — so that just these days seemed to go on shining like a solitary star in the twilight of his memory. "There was nothing false about it," he concluded earnestly, "or unfair to John (though perhaps there might have been, if it could have gone on). If there had been anything of that sort, I should not feel what I have been feeling so strongly the last few days." — he looked at Humphrey curiously, wondered whether to speak — that she is — still here! . . . in some way," he finished vaguely.

But Humphrey showed no surprise. He only raised his eyebrows a fraction of an inch, to indicate that the remark had made an impression on him.

"I only wish," he said, "that you could make my brother feel the same. You haven't seen him since we came back? It's terrible — terrible."

"But surely," said Gerald, "he at any rate believes —"

"I don't know what he believes," cut in Humphrey. "I don't think he knows himself. We did talk a bit about it. But the whole subject cropped up in an unlucky way — a mistake of mine — and I find it's impossible to argue with a man when he's bowled right over like that."

Gerald saw that Humphrey would like to continue the subject.

"How did it crop up?" he asked. Humphrey hesitated for some time.

"I told you," he said at last, "that I fainted, when I got in from that Dawson business?" Gerald nodded. "Well, it wasn't quite an ordinary faint. I seem to have

been conscious — some of the time anyway. And in that time I saw a whole lot of things — I still don't know how much. The whole job is to remember. Odd bits keep coming back to me even now — but only tiny bits. I don't think I shall ever remember more than a fragment and, even if I did, I sort of feel it would be impossible to hold it all in the mind at the same time without — without cracking!" He tapped the top of his head with his finger and paused for a moment. Gerald said nothing.

"Well," Humphrey went on, "One of the things I saw perfectly clearly at the time was — the reason of Margaret's accident."

"The reason?"

"That it was Karmic." Humphrey looked at Gerald enquiringly. "You've read a certain amount — you know what that means?"

"Of course."

"It happened before she died, you know. When I came round, I felt absolutely certain she wouldn't live." He paused reflectively. "It was a pretty stiff moment," he added. "Well," he went on, "after it was all over I — thought it might make it easier for John if I told him something of what I had seen."

"Tell me what you actually said!" said Gerald quickly.

"I told him — Gerald, am I an absolutely tactless fool? — that her Angel had killed her." Gerald winced violently. "Exactly!" said Humphrey significantly, "it makes you jump, too! Well, I don't know — I thought he would take the idea of a Guardian Angel much more for granted than I had ever done."

"It's not exactly one's idea of a 'Guardian Angel'," said Gerald grimly.

"Why not?" rapped out Humphrey sharply. "Do you mean you think it's an Angel's job to look after our bodies?"

"No," said Gerald, "when you put it that way, of course one can see that the idea's absurd. N-no. You may even be right."

"I know I am right. I didn't think it — I saw it."

"But why," said Gerald, "why should you have seen it just at that moment?"

"I can't tell you that. I didn't see that, or if I did see at the time, I have forgotten. I have a sort of idea — but it's only a theory I've worked out since on my own, and therefore it's just as likely to be wrong as right."

"What is it anyway, Humphrey?"

"Well, it's all really rather above my head. You'd probably understand it better yourself. But I had a sort of idea that all this painting and living in Italy, with John getting keener and keener on it every day, all this brilliant life in the senses that they were just starting out on — somehow they weren't meant to live it. I don't know. They might have been happy — but that isn't the point."

"But you don't suggest there is anything wrong in painting — or in Italy, just because you ran up against some nasty people? You can't make that sort of distinction on the level of art, you know, either — the sense is the spirit."

"Yes," said Humphrey obstinately, "but mightn't it have been time for them — for them, in this particular life — to get on to another kind of art — or something? I don't know, Gerald. I sort of feel this guessing isn't going to do any good. Let's chuck it!"

"I don't believe as a matter of fact," said Gerald thoughtfully after a long pause, "that they would have been happy for long. At least not John. I don't know about her. She was a very difficult person to understand." And after another pause he added: "Do you mean you told John all this?"

"I more or less hinted at it."

"And he didn't like it?"

"He simply hated it. It was awful." Humphrey paused. "He said very unpleasant things!" he added. "John can be beastly unpleasant!"

"Yes," agreed Gerald quickly, "without knowing it." They relapsed into silence.

"Gerald," said Humphrey after a time, "you don't really believe in reincarnation yourself, do you?" Gerald leaned back in his chair.

"I don't believe in anything, thank God!" he announced with a sort of professorial air, and he looked at Humphrey reprovingly, as he added: "I seem to be one of the few real scientists left." At this Humphrey's face suddenly relaxed its earnest expression. He grinned affably:

"All right Gov'nor!" he said, cringing and speaking with a cockney accent, "it's a fair cop!" But Gerald refused to laugh.

"It's all very well," he said sternly, "but I honestly regard this universal credulity as a serious matter. Nobody seems to be able to get on without believing something on someone else's authority. He must either believe what St. Paul said or else what Sir Jimminy Jimpkins said the day before yesterday in his epoch-making address to the Royal Society. And now the Brockmannites have started believing everything Brockmann said. I tell you seriously I feel extraordinarily lonely sometimes. I can't find anyone anywhere who doesn't believe either in the Apostles' Creed or in reincarnation or in electrons!" Gerald clasped his hands together on the word 'electrons' and, raising his eyes with a pious expression added: "Blessed are they which have not seen and yet have believed." Humphrey laughed.

"I know," he said. "You are perfectly right. But when you get absorbed in the practical work, when you have to keep acting on the assumption that something is true, you do get into the way of believing whether you have seen or not."

"Well, you shouldn't! In other words you mean you acquire 'habits of thought' — just the things you were always at me to get rid of."

"I will be good in the future," said Humphrey, "really!"

"Very well," said Gerald, still rather in the voice of the pedagogue, "we'll pass it over this time!" There was another long pause.

"What you have just said," began Humphrey at last, "makes it easier for me to tell you something I — I want to tell you."

"What is that?"

"There was something else I found out in that — faint. It concerns you rather closely."

"Lead on Macduff!" said Gerald. "I can bear it!" Humphrey looked up quickly; for Marston had suddenly fallen into that uneasy jesting, which he knew so well. He had expected it, but not so soon as this, not actually before he had spoken. Humphrey wondered once again if he really was to tell. Well, it was no use

vacillating. He had decided. But goodness, how hard it was! His voice would scarcely come out of his throat for shyness.

"I think . . . I saw . . . about you previous incarnation."

Gerald said nothing, but looked a swift question.

"It was — you were — a woman."

"Virtuous, I hope!"

"Not altogether." Humphrey ignored the flippancy. "In fact — to be perfectly frank — a courtesan!" Gerald did not speak. "I told you," said Humphrey, "because — Oh, never mind! I simply don't know. I am worried about having told you; but I should have been more worried still if I had kept silence. That's all I know."

"But why should you have seen this?" began Gerald, and then, as the light broke in. "Good Lord! you mean you were —"

"Among others — yes! But I think," went on Humphrey quickly, "we had a rather special relation. I think (it was — purely animal to begin with, and — gradually grew into something better). We sort of educated each other. That's what I seem to remember seeing." He ceased, and stared hard at Gerald, who once again said nothing.

"Don't just believe what I say open-mouthed!" said Humphrey at last.

"Don't worry!" said Gerald grimly: "I shan't." Humphrey smiled. He looked paler.

"No!" he said, "I know! That's what I meant by saying you had made it easier. But on the other hand don't just make light of it, Gerald, or I shall feel I oughtn't to have told you. Perhaps I oughtn't. Anyway, you're not angry?" Gerald shook his head vehemently. "Of course, it would only be one incarnation — not necessarily the last — I know nothing, except just that glimpse. At least —" Humphrey raised one hand a few inches from his knee and knit his brows hard — "by Gum! there was more, infinitely more — if only I could get it! Yes. The whole thing was part of an infinitely bigger scheme — a sort of centre . . ." For a second or two Humphrey kept his hand poised in the air, while his memory struggled with the hostile emptiness. Then he dropped it abruptly, and looked at Gerald with an expression of whimsical despair.

"It's no good," he said, "it's gone!" But after a while he added in a more ordinary voice: "I fancy others of us must have been there, too."

"Who?"

"I don't know — and even that's only guessing. I'm not going to say any more. The more I think and theorize about it, the less chance there is of really remembering." He changed the subject abruptly. "I wish to goodness I could overcome John's prejudices somehow," he said. "He's got that appalling feeling of having lost Margaret completely — and I'm afraid of its knocking him right over! Could you help at all, do you think?"

"What prejudice do you mean?"

"Brockmann!" Gerald hesitated.

"Do you think it's wise — after what you said?"

"You mean his dislike of outspokenness about the spiritual world?" Gerald nodded. "I know," said Humphrey. "He must simply get over that. It may even be his only chance."

"All right," said Gerald. "If the subject crops up, I'll say what I can. By the way, he's told me once or twice before that he thinks you are as good as cracked on that subject! He said he doubted if you had ever quite got over the War." Humphrey gave Gerald a strange look.

"Why do you look at me like that?" said Gerald.

"Only because I happen to have been thinking a good deal lately about this very thing."

"What?"

"This universal fear of spiritual science."

"Fear! I should have thought indifference was the word."

"Only on the surface. It is the same wherever it has been heard of — people meet it with suspicion or indifference, or an air of general knowingness, or polite contempt, or humour (humour especially — in this country) or elaborate arguments — and you look an inch behind and you find beneath all these different stunts the same thing — FEAR!"

"Gerald," Humphrey went on rapidly, biting his words off like so many dry biscuits, "I don't know whether it's anything to do with that faint — I feel as if I could write a kind of prophecy. Or not; I couldn't write it, because I can't write a decent sentence. You'd better do it! I can see this thing being suppressed more and more vindictively with every device known to human ingenuity — and the devil's."

"But surely," said Gerald, wondering for an instant if John were right after all about his brother, "if there is one virtue we do possess to-day, it's tolerance. We simply don't persecute people for their opinions — unless they are supposed to be dangerous to society." Humphrey smiled grimly.

"Don't we? Do you suppose there's only one kind of persecution?" He paused. "I told you most of my friends think I am mad, didn't I? Now you say my brother thinks the same thing. Just imagine that sort of stuff extended indefinitely! Isn't madness a danger to society? Aha! Just imagine a really solid alliance between — well — the worst in America and the worst in Russia! People will really believe we are mad, too! I was thinking of it only the other day. I saw all sorts of things, certifications, medicines, compulsory operations on the brain — God knows what! These little domestic misunderstandings are no more than the palest beginning. They're a joke to what's coming!" Humphrey's eyes flashed. "And all the time," he went on, "you can see a little group of people, steadily growing larger and larger, who will go on talking calmly and confidently — as a matter of course — about the Angels and Archangels and the rest of the Hierarchies and about their own dead friends and relations, just as the rest of the world talks about the bus-conductor." He paused and once again his eyes gleamed. "Either you are mad, or you have got something I haven't got. Therefore you are mad! Q.E.D! Eh, what? Ha!"

There was a pause.

"What about Adela?" said Gerald suddenly. "Was she there?"

"Where?" said Humphrey blankly. Gerald flushed a little, as he sought a way of explaining. Humphrey suddenly saw where his mind had been.

"Gerald, I imagine she must have been — and — others, as I say. But I won't theorize about it. It's bad."

"All right, I suppose I'd better not either."

Nor did he, exactly. Yet all that evening he remained extraordinarily excited by Humphrey's discourse. Looking back on his own life, he seemed to see it, more than he had ever done before, as an organic, necessary whole, woven in a miraculous way out of the actions and influences of all the friends and enemies he had met since his earliest childhood. He saw how the souls of his friends and teachers formed the very texture of his own soul. And yet this did not give him any feeling of nonentity. On the contrary, he had an odd perception of the way in which, ever since he became conscious, he himself had actually been doing, or trying to do, under all the apparent variations of interest and vacillations of purpose which at other times made his life seem so meaningless, precisely the same one thing.

CHAPTER LXX

It is easier to take a cat into Italy than to bring it back again to England. Poor Merlin was seized on the way home by kind but inexorable British Customs officials and condemned to two months' quarantine. Soon after John got back to Loomfield, with Janet who was going to keep house for him, Lady Hudson wrote to her son-in-law and offered, if he cared, to let him keep the cat, of which Margaret had been so fond. He was greatly touched by her thoughtfulness and, after a few minutes' consultation with Janet, wrote and accepted the offer. As soon as Merlin came out of quarantine, therefore, they both went up to town and stayed a few days. Lady Hudson, who looked lost and unhappy, was particularly kind to Janet, telling her to take the car whenever she wanted it, and apologising profusely for being unable to offer her the best bedroom in which, unfortunately, Sir Otto Hudson's father-in-law lay seriously ill.

One night a foreign-looking visitor — not the doctor and obviously not a relation, was shown into this bedroom, where he stayed for nearly two hours. And it bothered Janet not a little that, although she felt sure she had seen this man before, she could not remember on what occasion. John, who was spending his last few nights in town with Humphrey, did not see him.

The visitor was Rex Rollo. He found Sir Otto Hudson's father-in-law propped up in bed with a reading-lamp beside him and a green eye-shade fastened by an elastic band to his forehead. Rollo knew at once that the old man was seriously ill, for he heard every breath which the pale lips sucked in between them. And it became evident, as soon as they began to speak, that the sick man felt he must economise his words to the utmost possible extent. He would not, if he could avoid it, say anything that was not packed with meaning.

"I shall not be long in the body," he began, the moment Rollo had greeted him, "Afterwards — I shall still help — but very differently. You will need also clear, definite ideas. Try and remember — everything!"

"I shall try," said Rollo, "and I shall succeed."

"Semi-initiation," said the old man. "We have already spoken of it . . . to be crushed — always!" Rollo nodded gravely. "When they already know something of what must happen — then they can work effectively to what may happen — effectively — against us. The rest are harmless — talking — writing — the more the

better." The old man paused for a little, and smiled to himself. Suddenly his expression changed and he spoke again:

"You have learnt from Brockmann? You know him?"

"If I had wished to learn from Brockmann," said Rollo, "I should not be here." But the old man only made a gesture of angry impatience.

"Tut! You must learn from him. You must read all that he has written. If need be, you must join his movement." Rollo slightly raised his eyebrows; but he nodded his assent.

"Very well!"

"Also," went on the invalid, "Study the — historical causes of this — semi-initiation!"

"I have already begun to."

"Ah! — Tell me."

"It arose mainly," said Rollo calmly, "from the centre of Europe, before the Grand Orient had wholly lost touch. Herder, Lessing, Goethe, Schiller — I have other names — were all initiates."

"And all chatterboxes:" exclaimed the old man. "Yes. Go on! Go on!"

"There you have the beginning of this dangerous culture-epoch, in which — along various paths of art and literature — ordinary, unchosen souls can approach knowledge."

"Unchosen, Rollo — and unprepared! That is what you must make them see. It must come. But we are not ready. Some of the brothers are wavering. You must — make them see. Otherwise it will lead to terrible things. Horrible!" The old man shuddered. "Has my son-in-law told you anything of what he found in Italy? Horrible! And yet some of them are beginning to doubt. Perhaps we are ready! they say. Otto himself has been definitely shaken by his daughter's death. Rollo, you must make them see!" He paused, breathing hard for some time to recover from the effect of his last speech. "If I could only have kept this body a year or two longer! One single year! Everything is breaking up. Rollo, you will make them see!"

"I shall make them see!" said Rollo.

"Rollo — at all costs — reincarnation! Nobody!" He paused again, and again Rollo heard in the silence of the darkened room his difficult, irregular breathing. "I mean," he managed to go on at last, "no active intelligence! Teacup occultism — yes — encouraged!" He paused once more.

"This ought to be easy enough," he went on, his voice trailing off into a harsh whisper, "the ground is well prepared." He became restless, hoisting himself higher up on his pillow.

"But I am not satisfied," he insisted. "The atmosphere must be such — so complacently incredulous — that it would be safe — to report — for example, this talk verbatim . . . a vacuum . . . Europe!"

"They have been difficult years," he continued after another pause. "Many sacrifices — many many sacrifices — Ambrose, Theodoric, Hypatia . . ." he became lost in memory, while Rollo mentally substituted their real names for the pseudonyms by which it was customary to refer to public characters whose lives or reputations or liberty had been "sacrificed" by the brotherhood.

"I had to deal with them," went on the old man. "Brockmann — it was impossible to sacrifice. You will have Brockmann's work to deal with. I do not know if you will succeed."

"I shall succeed," said Rollo. "Now that I have found out what to do, I shall do it."

The invalid peered at him for a moment from under his eyeshade.

"Avoid melodramatic methods — always!" he said. "What other advice can I leave you? It has all been said before. Always work through the imagination rather than the passions — to the last. If you must resort to appetites — remember — nothing above — sodomy — quite safe. Anything can be done with a confirmed sodomite — especially, of course — trusted by the public."

"Avoid feeling! Their appeal is to feeling!"

"Remember — a vacuum."

"Too much air — bad for the heart!" He stopped again, pressing his hand to his left breast, and it became painfully apparent that, whatever might be the case with Europe, he himself was not suffering from too much air.

"A vacuum in the centre . . . Europeans . . . Europe . . . for the present . . . safer." Rollo turned to the gasping figure.

"I assure you," he said solemnly, "I understand all! Should you not, for a time, cease talking? Or shall I go altogether?" The old man shook his head. He drew as deep a breath as his fading lungs would allow.

"Ask me — questions!" he gasped. Rollo closed his eyes. He was ready with several questions, but was anxious, first of all, to give the invalid some time to recover himself. At last, speaking in a low, even voice, he said:

"What is England?" There was no answer. He decided to put the question in a slightly different form, and he asked:

"Are we England?"

"If so," he added, when again there came no answer from the bed, "I do not understand why so many of us are not English by blood. I myself am not English by blood."

"You should be able to answer such questions for yourself," said the voice from the bed, speaking a little more easily again. "How many English are there, who would not repudiate us, if they became conscious of us?"

"I have thought of that," replied Rollo calmly, "but I do not see how they could become conscious of us without ceasing to be 'English!'" There was another long silence, and then the voice from the bed replied with slow deliberation,

"Both England and America are instruments in the hand of the Great Architect." Rollo pondered for a moment.

"Have England and America any longer a separate existence?" he asked.

"That is being decided. It will probably depend on yourself, as much as anyone. For our purposes it is better, as you must know, that they should not exist separately. For we know that the ultimate future lies in any case with a united West." Rollo nodded massively.

"Short of unthinkable catastrophes!" he said. And the invalid also nodded:

"Short of unthinkable catastrophes!"

"I have another question," the visitor began after a time, "the Jews —" But the sick man raised his hand to stop him. It was evident from the way in which he spoke that he had had to answer the same question more than once before.

"There is no conscious aim," he said authoritatively. "Wherever they find themselves they work automatically towards — tightening up! Because they are automatic; they are the safest and most useful of all. They are also to be employed — with caution — as scapegoats." Rollo did not reply.

"Raise the blind!" said the voice from the bed suddenly. Rollo crossed to the window and released the spring. The blind shot up and through the pane he saw the crescent moon, sailing over the chimney pots like a handsome witch. The sick man raised a gaunt arm and pointed at it. He looked at Rollo heavily.

"I understand!" said Rollo.

"I have other questions," he said after a while.

"Yes! Yes! go on! That is why I sent for you!"

"What am I to do most of all?" Rollo's questions seemed to have roused the dying man's spirit somewhat. He looked at his visitor more intently and then spoke more continuously and with less effort.

"For the first few years," he said, "after I leave the body, you will work — we shall work — especially fruitfully. Use that time! Use every minute of it! You can work deepest of all — for you can work culturally. Remember that during the next decades our people are going to learn from the centre — nothing will stop them. See that they learn from the safe ones!" He paused for breath.

"You will work especially well into the free societies — the Universities — the Publishing trade. Remember the rule: always to be ready with an alternative! In philosophy — Kant. In literature — but I can leave it to your judgment. Much — indeed, most — of it is perfectly safe. That is easy!"

"In psychology —" the speaker paused. "In the next few years this will be the most important of all. They are all interested. And here Brockmann himself will be the competitor You can work more fruitfully here than anywhere else. Already, before you found me, you were engaged in spreading the fame of Vogel, were you not? In Lust and Vogel you have perfect alternatives; they are from the same earth-region; they appeal to the same interest — and they are harmless."

"Rollo," went on the speaker more earnestly, evidently following up some private train of thought, "you must become more and more practiced at detecting the Three under all their disguises, under all the names that are found for them — in order to keep them from uniting. This will be your special work; for you understand deeply the difference between a word and its meaning — the difference and the relation! The Three! You are able to lay your finger on them. You have discovered for yourself how, what are God, Freedom, and Immortality to one man are, perhaps . . . Business — Christ — and Sex to another. To poor Ambrose they were Order, Beauty and Liberty. You know that the ideas matter nothing, and that the more these are spoken of, the less the realities are there. And you also know that the realities matter everything — that one of them alone, that two of them alone, are harmless — impotent — the one running aimlessly to seed or the two wearing each other out in everlasting fruitless attrition." He had grown hoarse again, and was panting. "But do you know, I wonder," he went on, clenching his teeth with the effort

it cost him — “do you really know yet all that it means, Rollo, if the three realities succeed in uniting — so that it strikes right down into the Threptike? Rollo, then, it is like —” His voice had dropped to such a faint whisper that the visitor could scarcely hear it. He bent his dark head nearer to the silvery one, nearer to the strangely smooth face, which shone so ghastly in the glare of the little reading-lamp. “Like dynamite!” the sick man gasped out. He fell back on the pillow.

“Therefore” — he went on after another minute’s rest, still painfully eager to be heard, “therefore, whenever you see the Three even approaching — act! Jump!”

Rollo nodded: “I know!” he said.

“As we jumped on poor Theodoric!” whispered the dying man in a calmer and more reflective tone, “at what cost!” He was talking to himself. “But it must have come! Sooner or later it must have come!” he murmured, and it seemed as if he found the thought consoling, for after that he rested for a long time without speaking.

“Rollo — you will need strength, strength, strength!” he said suddenly. “It is all breaking up. There is no longer the old confidence. Only the other day there was that disgraceful affair of Dodge!”

“Yes. I did not quite understand what happened!” said Rollo, leaning forward in his chair.

“For a few days — he simply broke right away! The personality through which we were working actually did not know what Dodge was going to do! How did such an uncontrollable ever reach such a position — tell me — unless we are breaking?” Rollo made no reply, and after a time the sick man spoke again, this time with an air of greater confidence:

“Remember use the obstructions! Turn them to good, as I was able to in that case!”

“It was your scheme, then, Sir?”

“Of course! For more than a year I had been trying to make the brothers see that the Press is a worn-out instrument, and that it was time to transfer to the ether. It was impossible. They would not believe it. Then the situation arose — and the sacrifice of the Paper companies was the only way out!”

“Rollo — you will probably follow this up by cutting clear of them altogether apart from occasional illustrations, occasional cartoons — and even there you will have to go very carefully! Far too many have been growing conscious. I have watched it. Consciousness of the Press would lead to consciousness of us — if we should still be working through it. Indeed, it has begun already. They are bringing dreams of us into their novels — their plays. Ah — everything is breaking. You will need strength — strength!”

“I have strength,” said Rollo, “and you will give me more.” The sick man seemed pleased:

“That was well spoken!” he said. But he soon added: “And yet these dreams, too, must be fostered — sometimes — when they are crude enough. For they lead to complacency — to closed minds. Rollo, it is difficult. There are no rules. You must have, in each case, the instinct.”

“After all,” he went on, appearing to derive courage from a new thought, “the International Bank will be there — for you — I had to work without that. It is strong.

You will find it simplifying everything. Rollo, perhaps it is my greatest comfort — wherever I have failed I did so much to bring this into being.” He ceased, exhausted once more by his efforts.

“I have one more question!” said Rollo after another long silence, “if your body is strong enough!”

“Speak!”

“Must we still maintain the illusion of scarcity?” And when the sick man made no answer, Rollo added firmly: “It is . . . cruel!” At last the voice from the bed replied,

“Yes, the poverty is cruel — — but it is kinder in the end. Here — economic freedom would still lead to — other freedoms. In America, where that is not so true, we have already relaxed much — as you know.” He paused.

“Here too, it may change!” he added, at last. “Indeed, a definite relaxation has already arisen — out of Dodge’s escape.”

“Yes,” said Rollo. “But the effects are vanishing again now, since the stabilization, and much additional suffering is the result!”

“You must have the instinct,” gasped the voice from the bed. “Act as you feel I would act — and then — I shall be acting.”

Rollo rose and knelt down by the bedside, while the old man placed both hands in a peculiar way on his forehead. For several minutes the two remained motionless in this attitude together. Then Rollo rose to his feet again.

“You will be acting, Master!” he said. And, with a stately bow, he left the room.

CHAPTER LXXI

While John was staying with him, Humphrey invited him to attend one of those social gatherings at which Brockmann’s lectures were read and discussed, and John yielded rather to his brother’s obvious anxiety than to any inclination of his own. After the reading of the lecture there was a reception, and he soon found himself sipping coffee opposite an enthusiastic lady, who at once desired to know if he had not thought it magnificent. Yes, he said, he had admired it, but he went on to complain, with a faintly whimsical air, of the elaborateness and difficulty of the steps which Brockmann prescribed for the attaining of the new consciousness.

“Ah!” said the lady, “but what does that matter, if it’s so necessary?” The intensity with which she uttered these words amounted practically to a personal rebuke, and John perceived at once that she had taken his complaint as springing from laziness. He only desired now to close the subject in as amicable a way as possible.

“You are probably right,” he agreed; and he smiled. But this was clearly not enough for the lady, who had an uneasy sensation that there was still something there which she had not touched.

“Surely,” she insisted, “one can’t even think of that, when one realises in a living way the truth that it is only possible to approach the Christ through Brockmann!”

“Ah!” said John, “if one really felt that?”

"But it is so!" Her eyebrows demanded a reply, and he gave her the most conciliatory one he could think of.

"Possibly!"

"Yes! He said so." She nodded kindly as she spoke, showing that she no longer regarded this as a conversation, but rather as an opportunity for benevolently bestowing information on him.

"Brockmann? I understood (and he recollected certain conversations with Humphrey) not!"

"You will find it," announced the lady, "in the collected works, Volume X page 303!" John wondered if he could get away. But he now perceived that, without either of them noticing it, the determined woman had literally backed him into a corner of the room, where the general buzz of conversation and the clicking of spoons and coffee cups prevented them from being overheard. Humphrey was right over in the corner. There was no chance of escape.

"Let me get you some more coffee," he suggested. But she shook her head and continued to look at him enquiringly.

"If Brockmann said that," he replied to the look, "I'm afraid Brockmann was wrong."

The lady stared at him with a frown of perplexity and amazement. And then suddenly, she smiled benevolently.

"I know," she said, "he says we are to develop self-reliance of thought, and I'm sure it is a good thing; but isn't it taking rather a heavy responsibility on oneself to prefer one's own judgment on a great question such as this!" He ceased staring down at his spoon and stole a momentary glance at her, which filled him with pity. For he saw with what difficulty she had succeeded in bringing the 'loving' smile to her face, while out of her two eyes there stared at him, in as unmistakable form as he had ever seen it the cold, persecuting, 'Ialdabaoth' gleam.

"I doubt if we should ever understand one another," he said at last as gently as he could. "To my mind it is just the 'great' questions that we cannot possibly help deciding for ourselves!"

"Perhaps you are right," she said, secretly giving him up.

But John was now lost. He had suddenly descended into the crypt which lay at the foundation of all his moral choices; and it had brought him a pleasurable thrill of recognition. The problem with which she had presented him had taken him right back to that horrible evening when Dawson had frightened him, by questioning whether he was 'right' to feel — what he simply did feel. He glanced for an instant down the dim intersecting arcades of logic and ethics, the good fat pillars, the solid rounded arches. They were still there. They would stand.

"Supposing you were right," he said to the lady dreamily — "that is, supposing it could be definitely proved in some way that Brockmann is right in what he says about Christ, it wouldn't make the slightest difference. THAT is my point! It would simply mean that I should have to find some other name than "Christ" for — for whatever I mean now when I use that name." He paused for an instant. She was looking down at her empty cup. "Yes," he went on, "and even if I were all wrong, even if there were no other and your Christ were the only Christ, so that to overcome death, we had to attach ourselves to him. That would make no difference

either. I would STILL rather perish, or sacrifice my continuity, or whatever you call it, in the service of my illusion of a universal Christ than escape death through your truth of an 'early-doors only' one!"

"It is my misfortune," he added humbly, when she did not reply, "as many of my friends know to their cost that, just as I become most engrossed in the pure argument — most free from all feeling of any sort — my tongue runs away with me and says the sort of cheaply effective thing that other people only say in anger."

But by this time Humphrey had come up to them to take him away. The lady held out her hand, giving John at the same time a deeply thoughtful look.

"Well, goodbye!" she said, "it's been most interesting. I hope we shall meet again." John shook hands, and the two brothers left together. On the way home he recounted part of the conversation to Humphrey.

"On the only two occasions," he concluded, "when I have been to a meeting here, everything seems to have been specially arranged to prove to me that Brockmann is really everything you say he is not."

"Ah!" said Humphrey, "you were talking to Miss Dominick. It was most unfortunate. But after all any spiritual movement attracts flighty and irresponsible minds, as you must know for yourself. If you are going to judge it by them, you do so at your own risk."

"But she gave chapter and verse!" Humphrey laughed.

"I doubt if there is any footling idea under the sun for which chapter and verse haven't been found in Brockmann by some idiot!" he said.

Feeling that he owed Humphrey some sort of statement of his position, John then developed his main objection to Brockmann's teaching — that of esotericism. To follow him intelligently demanded a first-class education. Whether or no, therefore, there were any artificial esotericism in the Movement, there was a certain inevitable class esotericism, which put it out of court, as far as he was concerned.

"Exactly the same is true of the Church," said Humphrey.

"No. There is something there for all levels of understanding."

"Yes — but different things!" Humphrey paused, and on reflection it seemed to him that he had conceded too much. "You say 'all levels'! but just how much is there in the Church to-day (never mind the Middle Ages) for your outer circle, for your uneducated man without any historical sense?" John walked on without replying. He was thinking of the Loomfield lectures.

"Well anyhow," he said at last, "I don't like it! I won't have anything to do with reincarnation!"

"Why?" said Humphrey quickly, "the whole of life makes nonsense without reincarnation — on any theory. And that's really what you're up against all the time. Why won't you have anything to do with it? It explains nearly everything."

"Yes," said John bitterly, "it explains nearly everything beautifully! It's most comforting. It explains why X has £2,000 a year and a good education and libraries of books and holidays abroad and Y has nothing a year and the choice between a slum and a workhouse. Why, why, why! Oh, it's his own fault. Right! Let him stew in his own juice while we get on with the culture!" And there was that in his brother's voice which caused Humphrey to change the subject.

CHAPTER LXXII

Mrs. Marston, who had been living, since her husband's death, with a married daughter in Glasgow, jumped eagerly at her son's suggestion of a small house somewhere within daily reach of London — a scheme which his regular and slightly increasing income now made possible. After spending a little time hunting about together, they eventually found one which suited them pretty well and moved into it a few weeks after the Trinders' return from Italy. About the middle of October, when they had had some time to settle down, Humphrey went out to see them both, and found them, absorbed in the business of transforming a wilderness into a garden, turning the pages of rose catalogues, and planting perennials for the following Spring.

Shortly after this Humphrey notified his landlord of his intention to leave the Bloomsbury flat altogether. His examination had been successfully concluded and he intended to go abroad for a year to work in a clinic, where the type of therapy, in which he was specially interested, was practised and investigated. Before John left him, however, and returned to Loomfield, he resolved to celebrate a little farewell dinner-party, to which he invited both Gerald and Janet.

Gerald, arriving from his office, not long before seven, found them already sitting round the dinner table — the only available space — discussing Metcalfe. He heard John saying to Humphrey, evidently in answer to some question put by the latter before he came in: "But that's just the thing! I couldn't get at his own attitude at all. Apparently he's no longer interested in the Releasing Loan! — doesn't think it would be a good thing. Or no! — he thinks that public opinion against it is too strong. I couldn't make out which. I'm not even sure if he's capable of distinguishing the two ideas."

"But didn't you force him to?" asked Humphrey quickly.

"It's all very well!" said John. "It's extremely difficult to nail a man down, if he doesn't mean to be nailed. I did have a shot. He said something about being a Pragmatist."

"Oh yes," he added after a brief pause, "there's something else I've since heard from Trumpett. Apparently the man's been secretary to — I forget whether it's three or four — different cabinet-ministers during the last six years — Weap, Fishmore, Newton and Dodge. Anyway I know they included all three parties. That seems to me to be the worst sign of all!"

"You never told me that, John!" said Janet.

"No. I forgot," he replied.

"Come along!" said Humphrey. "We must feed!"

"Your last revelation," said Gerald over his soup, "sounds so bad that my chief difficulty now is to understand how he ever came to throw himself into the Releasing Loan business at all. Why, it was Metcalfe who talked Dodge over in the first place, wasn't it?"

"You mustn't jump to conclusions!" said Janet rather sharply. "Nearly all the secretaries change about like that. I know Mr. Metcalfe better than anyone here. He's a thoroughly nice man!"

"The point at the moment, though," said Gerald slowly, crumbling his bread, "is, is he a thoroughly straight man?"

"Yes — no! — yes!" said Janet and flushed up, when everybody laughed. In a moment, however, she joined in the laughter herself.

"I think," pronounced Gerald urbanely, "we may take it that the honourable member's answer is — provisionally — in the negative!"

"Personally, I don't see anything so very abnormal about it!" put in John, "we must simply assume that he had a sudden impulse to be straight — or straighter than before. We don't know of any special reason for it, and perhaps there was none. But people do have these impulses." Janet did not speak again after this for some time.

"Did you get any information out of him about the — the *déba*cle, John?" asked Gerald in a rather gentle voice, "or was he too much taken up with his newly-wedded wife?" As he uttered the last words, the speaker directed at Humphrey a blank, almost insulting, stare, to which the other's face made no special response. Humphrey knew very well that it was intended to inform him that Gerald had said nothing to John of his affair with Adela.

"Yes, I got a certain amount," replied John, "but it was very difficult — because of what I've just described. It wasn't that you suspected the man of actually telling lies but — oh, I don't know! It's so hopeless!" He paused. "This is roughly what I made out," he went on: "The exchange was of course being hammered by interests outside this country, as both Dodge and Streeter knew it would be. That had very little to do with it. They knew that industry as a whole was deadly sick of deflation and that the outcry against the falling pound was chiefly bankers' froth. But then Dodge heard that the Governor of the Bank of England had been sent for by the King! And, for some reason, that seemed to take all his confidence away. Streeter nearly killed himself with efforts to bolster him up and — I rather gather — might have succeeded, if Dodge hadn't discovered something else — or said he had discovered it. It appears he came in to Streeter one day with a white face, saying that, if they went on, there would be a civil war between the Banks and the Government. He showed him a typewritten copy of an elaborate plan of campaign, which someone had stolen for him. I asked Metcalfe if he didn't think Dodge probably wrote it all himself, to save his own face. He didn't answer. Anyway this was the plan: the Bank was going to appeal to the Crown to veto the new Loan, on the ground that it was a dangerous experiment and did not represent the real wishes of the nation and so on. If the King refused to exercise his veto, it would still coolly refuse to do anything, instructions or no instructions. Only then it would run for all it was worth a panic about keeping Banks independent of Governments and the International obligations of Finance and so on. And of course the ground has been steadily prepared for this ever since the War by continual propaganda, and the various engineered inflations in the European countries on the Continent.

That was where the Civil War was to begin. If the Bank struck first, it would of course be able to hold up the whole life of the nation, for naturally the other banks would follow suit. And the Government's got nothing now — not even a Mint, or an issue of currency-notes. I pressed Metcalfe hard and he admitted that the rest

of the instructions contained some practical details about the best way of turning the new concrete branch-buildings into machine-gun emplacements.”

“But you don’t believe that yourself,” said Humphrey quickly, “you say you think Dodge invented it all.”

“I don’t know what to think,” said John, tired with his long account, “and to tell you the truth I’m rather losing interest in it.”

“Losing interest!” exclaimed Gerald.

“Yes. Because I don’t feel I personally can do anything about it. I’m really much more interested in the human beings I have round me, as they are here and now, than I am in possible new civilisations. A new order of civilisation may be absolutely necessary; but in the meantime these people are actually here, forming part of the old one. And they will continue to form part of it. Economic freedom — larger incomes — wouldn’t really make so very much difference — except perhaps to their happiness for a short time. It wouldn’t turn a crude mind into a developed one or a bad man into a good. I believe it would make all the difference in the world to their children — but I just feel that isn’t my job. That’s all!” There was a pause after he finished speaking.

“You are staying on in Loomfield — and in the Church — of course!” said Gerald at last.

John nodded, and went on to explain in a pessimistic, though not exactly gloomy, tone how he believed he had made a crucial mistake. His error had lain in supposing that anyone with his upbringing could ever come to feel really at home in the Anglican Church. He at any rate had tried the experiment and had failed. But he did not think the remedy was to rush away into some new sphere and, probably therefore, into new errors of the same kind. He had reached a certain position, because he was a certain (possibly rather short-sighted) kind of man, and he proposed to make as good a thing of that position as he could. It was in the more evangelical circles of the Church, he said, that he found the jarring element least obtrusive though he differed violently from the typical evangelical over the latter’s tendency to belittle the Sacrament. And then, with a glance at Janet for her permission, he told them that they were moving together shortly out of their present house into one of the poorest streets in Loomfield. Janet had found she liked the kind of work and the kind of human relations it involved, and he felt the same.

“I think you are probably right,” said Gerald slowly, as he finished speaking, “I always felt something lacking in all that economic business. It’s — well, it’s a new idea, but not a new inspiration. You need to have plenty of inspiration in yourself, if you are going in for it. I don’t mean —” he added hastily, seeing where the argument led, “that you haven’t —” But John shook his head.

“I haven’t!” he interrupted, “that’s just it! I only thought I had!”

“You feel like that because you are in low spirits!” suggested Gerald, and John smiled politely. For a few moments there was a rather depressed silence. And then Gerald suddenly began:

“I was reading in Novalis the other day —”

“Do you ever read anything else nowadays?” cut in Humphrey. Gerald put out his tongue at him and went on:

“Something rather to the purpose.” He took out a little notebook. “Listen:

'Inevitable as it may be in certain periods that, in order to produce new and necessary compounds and bring about a fresh and purer crystallisation, everything should be reduced to a state of flux, yet it is just as necessary that the disaster should be mitigated and total dissolution prevented, in order that a stock may survive, a core, to which the new mass can attach itself and round which it can build itself into beautiful new forms. Let the solid element therefore draw itself closer together, in order that the excess of heat may be reduced; and let no stone be left unturned to prevent a softening of the bones and a decay of the essential fibres.'

"That's just what I mean!" exclaimed John almost eagerly, as soon as he had finished, "There are plenty of people rushing about looking for new stunts of every kind. It won't do the world any harm to have a few sober folk trying to understand the old ones and to get the best out of them."

"Yes," said Gerald, "it's all right as long as you have your roots firmly planted in some soil or other. I did think at one time that you were rather inclined to make the economic idea itself into a religion. The people who do that will be no use to anything — not even to the economic idea itself. And that's rather my criticism of the people interested in economic freedom, as far as I am acquainted with them. They don't seem to have struck any roots. They bump about from top to bottom as much as anyone else — rather more — if anything."

"Ha!" ejaculated Humphrey.

"Bump about from top to bottom?" enquired Janet.

"Yes," said Gerald. "They can't stay in the middle. Oh bother! How can I possibly explain? I'm assuming everybody's been listening to Humphrey and me talking!"

"I think," said Janet slowly, "I do understand."

"Well, I don't!" exclaimed John.

"Yes, you do!" said Humphrey. "You told me all about it yourself."

"When?"

"When you were still interested in new civilisations — that night you came in and found Dawson and Rollo here!"

"How do you mean — what did I say?"

"You were talking about the Stoics, and you said new civilisations are only founded from the heart!"

"Yes," said John, putting his hand to his head, "I do remember it now — and Gerald spoke about 'cor-age!'"

"But what has that got to do with staying in the middle?" he added.

"The heart is the middle — look! The point is everyone lives in his head and is afraid of his body — afraid of it or fascinated by it — it's the same thing. We have forgotten that there is a region between, the heart region, the region that has to do with everything in us that is rhythmic, the circulation of the blood, and the breathing and so forth. That is why we have forgotten how to feel."

"The breathing!" exclaimed Janet suddenly.

“And it takes English people worst of all,” said Gerald complacently. “We can hardly speak of the body without a sort of leer. That would be bad enough in any case, but it’s desperate now that we have got to a state when we can’t see anything else but the body! We turn up our noses at the Germans for being ‘earthy,’ and it never occurs to us that earth is nothing to be especially ashamed of — that it is in fact nothing else than visible Spirit.”

“No,” said John stoutly, “I have never done that. And nobody can say I have. On the contrary — what you said last — that is exactly what I mean by the sacrament. And of course there are heaps of people like me. I don’t think we are anything like as far gone as you make out.”

“Yes,” said Gerald, “but we mustn’t confuse the abstract idea of a via media between body and mind with the thing itself.”

“Since when,” enquired John with something of his old fire of sarcasm, “have bread and wine been an abstract idea?” Gerald laughed.

“Right in the Solar Plexus!” he exclaimed, “No I wasn’t thinking so much of you, John.”

“But I know what Gerald means,” said Humphrey. “He wants to make it clear that he’s not talking about some neat psychological theory of a balance between Thinking, Feeling, and Willing. What he is talking about is a definite Thing — a sort of Tertium Quid — you have either got it or you haven’t.” He turned to Gerald. “Is that right?” Gerald nodded and was about to explain further, when an interruption occurred. From another part of the flat there came a loud and mournful wail. It was repeated.

“Good lord!” exclaimed Gerald, “what on earth’s that?” Janet laughed.

“It’s only Merlin!” she said. “I brought him along in a basket for you to see — after his adventures! I couldn’t resist somehow. He went off to sleep in John’s bedroom, so we left him there. And I expect he’s just woken up.” John, who had been out when she arrived, knew nothing about all this. Meanwhile the wailing did not cease and soon another noise arose alongside of it — a series of gentle, irregular thuds, which suggested that Merlin was jumping on and off the furniture. Gerald looked from one to the other anxiously. He had also possessed a cat and he thought he recognised the peculiar protesting intonation of that miau, and the meaning of those uneasy thuds! Nobody, however, seemed inclined to move. At last he could bear it no longer.

“I say, what about sanitary arrangements?” he asked, addressing no-one in particular. At the same moment the noises ominously ceased.

“He’s perfectly all right!” said Janet. “I put a box of earth in with him. He never makes any mistakes.”

John turned and stared at her incredulously.

“How on earth did you learn to deal with that sort of situation?” he said. And she explained that Margaret had told her, when they were in Italy.

“Oh, let’s have him in!” said Gerald. “May I?” He went out of the room and soon came back with a rumbling mass of grey fur and whiskers, which he deposited on his knee and began stroking affectionately. Humphrey was now watching Gerald closely.

“Well,” said John, “can you tell us anything more about this Tertium Quid. What sort of thing is it? Is it sold by weight? When you have got it, can you give it to anyone else?”

“I can’t tell you any more about it,” said Gerald tranquilly without looking up from his new occupation. “I can only call it by other names.”

“For instance?”

“For instance, The Eternal Feminine! Ow!” he let out a sudden yell, as Merlin, to show his appreciation of all these attentions, luxuriously extended his claws into their bestower’s kneecap.

“Then it is confined to the male sex!” exclaimed John with a hint of triumph in his voice. But Janet vehemently shook her head.

“No!” she affirmed. “I know what Mr. Marston means perfectly well.” Gerald looked at her with great interest.

“What Goethe meant would perhaps be more grateful,” he said. “Thank you!” And he added, speaking to her, “It simply makes you cry, doesn’t it, when you realise what a crude, morbid caricature poor Shaw has managed to make of the same thing?”

“I don’t know much about that,” said Janet.

“I thought,” said John to Gerald, “you didn’t like Goethe!”

“Nor do I.”

“Well, then —”

“I can’t find a farthing’s worth of personal affection for him anywhere in me. I’m speaking now of admiration and gratitude.”

“You mean,” said Humphrey, who had been listening keenly and anxiously, “you are grateful to him for all that Brockmann has pointed out — the theory of perception and so forth?” Gerald turned to him, not without a dim sense of standing in the witness-box.

“No,” he said, “cutting that out — though of course I agree with you that it’s the only thing that really matters — I meant a more personal kind of gratitude —” he paused. “The thing I am most grateful to him for is just the thing that makes me dislike him most,” he added.

“Go on!” said Humphrey. Gerald paused for a moment to think.

“He taught me,” he said at last, “or rather he absolutely forced me to admit, dead against my will, and just at a time when I was most badly needing it, the necessity of egoism.”

“Well, I’m dashed!”

“What do you mean, Gerald?” asked John quietly.

“I mean — well — Christianity tells you to sacrifice your Ego, not to pretend you haven’t got one. That’s what they’ve all been at me to do, ever since I can remember — and they jolly nearly succeeded. I sometimes think — don’t you understand what I mean? — no one ought to be allowed to read the Gospels till he is twenty-one!”

The intense, almost tranced way in which Janet had been looking at him for the last few moments made Gerald feel uncomfortable. To break the spell, he rose and walked across the room to her, holding out Merlin in front of him.

"You take him now!" he said. "The feminine lap is better adapted for the purpose. And incidentally," he said viciously, "I suspect you of having laughed loudest when he stuck his claws into my knee just now!" Janet smiled and took the cat from him without saying anything. An idea had come into her mind, for which she could not yet find words. Gerald sat down again and for some time nobody spoke. Janet, who looked well and happy, went on idly stroking Merlin, only occasionally glancing up at one of her three companions. She noticed how Humphrey, sitting beside her, had the same young-old look, which had characterised him ever since he left the Army. Gerald, on the other side of the room with John, did not look a day older than the first time she had seen him that evening with Margaret at Onslow. John's face, on the other hand, with its rapidly increasing network of lines, was already that of a man between forty and fifty years old.

"John," said Gerald quietly, breaking a long silence, "what happened to that Committee of Experts that sat on the Releasing Loan suggestion?"

"What happened?" said John. "Nothing of course!"

"Has it issued a report?"

"Not yet," said John.

"It will have to make one."

"Of course — in about twelve months' time it will present the report which my father-in-law — or Killigrew, it doesn't matter which — already has written out somewhere in his desk." Gerald said nothing to this, but after a few moments' reflection turned again to John and asked him:

"Do you think it's absolutely "as you were!" then, and that we haven't advanced a single step towards an honest policy of financing consumption?"

"Absolutely! It might be years — decades — before it happens again that anyone in as influential a position as Metcalfe feels an impulse to — break the circle! We've just admitted that we don't know now in the least what caused him to. Why should a miracle happen twice?"

"I —" began Janet. She stopped abruptly. They looked at her and waited for her to go on, but after a time it became apparent that she did not intend to. Nobody laughed, however, or pressed her to speak.

"As you were", murmured Gerald at last, half to himself. "It's a curious thing, sometimes I feel as if a tremendous lot had been happening to us all, and at other times as if nothing had happened at all. I wonder which is right. I suppose most people would say nothing at all!" John looked at his profile in amazement. Nothing! It was almost unbelievable how brutal people could sometimes be, without meaning anything. But in the meantime Gerald's remark had at last brought Janet to the point of words.

"One thing . . ." she began, speaking slowly and intently, "I think, has happened We have got rid of shame!" They all looked at her in surprise; and waited, but she had no more to say.

"Sometimes," said John to her at last in a worried voice, "I don't understand the things you say at all. Supposing that were true, do you mean to imply that it is a good thing?" But Gerald, who had now had time to ponder her suggestion, suddenly took up the cudgels.

"It's not only a good thing," he said, "it's becoming an absolute necessary one. The only question is how we do it. Those who can't do it the right way are simply doing it the wrong way; human consciousness is like a modern business; it must either go on continually increasing, or it will drop back. It can't just stop still, however much it wants to. That's why you get these cults of savagery and a spate of books about people marrying native wives and all that twaddle. The people who won't go on want to get back — to the darkness." And he told them of Pocock's latest novel, three hundred pages long, describing, from beginning to end, a single act of coition.

"But isn't that the same story again?" suggested Humphrey. "People rushing away from their head straight down to the most bodyish part of their bodies? leaving out the middle!"

"Yes," said Gerald, "it is the same thing. And it's pitiful!" He turned to John. "Do you see what Janet means?" he asked.

"A little, perhaps. But it doesn't excite me so very much. After all, it's of no concern to more than about point one per cent of the whole population. They don't read Pocock in Loomfield!" Janet glanced at him.

"Yes," she said doubtfully. "That often destroys the whole thing for me, too. When I feel I have got hold of something tremendously valuable — I suddenly remember all these people. Besides —" she stopped abruptly, having just checked herself once more from speaking of Metcalfe. Gerald murmured something in a low voice, which no one quite heard.

"What's that?" asked Humphrey. Gerald repeated in a louder voice:

"Cras amet qui nunquam amavit quique amavit cras amet."

He translated the line and turned to Janet. "That's what I sometimes comfort myself with when I am in the same mood!" Janet nodded at him.

"It's nice!" she said. Once more silence fell, and once more it was broken by Gerald.

"I was reading a book the other day," he suddenly began, "that's supposed to contain a sort of prophecy of Bolshevism — Dostoevsky's Possessed. There's a scheme started in it for the total destruction of civilisation. The idea is to form little groups — of five, I think it is — all over the country, each group being bound together by what the villain of the book says is the strongest of all bonds — fear. If possible, one of the members is to have committed a murder, with the rest of the group as witnesses, for that is the most lasting cement of all. However, the details don't matter. The point is that then, gradually, links are to be formed between the groups, till you have a sort of network, or nervous system, spreading all over Russia — eventually all over the world.

The idea has come to me at just this moment that exactly the opposite might be true of the building up of a new civilisation — a series of groups, forming independently, bound together by love, and then eventually joining up with one another into a larger whole — and so on. I don't know how much there is in it." He paused. "Suppose there were something distinctive," he added — "something quite different from any other relation — more of an organic nature — about the relation between souls, which had — which had got rid of shame!" Humphrey nodded quickly.

“Organic’ is exactly the right word!” he exclaimed with furious eagerness: “Your group would be like the ganglia of the sympathetic nervous system of a colossal human being! Eh? Isn’t that the idea?” But Gerald suddenly smiled:

“This is beginning to sound suspiciously like my old friend, Adam Caedmon!” he said. Humphrey turned on him almost savagely:

“Oh, your humour will be the death of you!” Gerald held up both hands!

“Kamerad!” and Humphrey laughed half unwillingly, as he gave his friend a curious look.

“Did you write anything after that conversation we had last time you were up?” he asked suddenly.

“Yes,” said Gerald, “I wrote something. But it hasn’t turned out quite as you meant it, I am afraid.”

“Never mind! Is it good?”

“Yes.”

“Have you got it with you?”

“I have, as a matter of fact.”

“Read it aloud!” Gerald looked at the other two enquiringly. They nodded encouragement.

“Well,” he said, “I seem to have done most of the talking already to-night and I’d just as soon listen to somebody else. But I’m not going to pretend I don’t want to read it — if you all really want to hear it.”

“What is it called?” asked Janet.

“I don’t know. It hasn’t got a name yet. Humphrey’s “Tertium Quid,” if you like!” Janet nodded.

“Yes,” she said, “I certainly want to hear it,” and John also repeated his request so Gerald, fetching his manuscript, settled down beside the shaded lamp, and began to read.

[Chapters LXXIII and LXXIV are published as *The Rose on the Ash-Heap*.]

CHAPTER LXXV

Gerald Marston, who had been reading the last few paragraphs in an uncertain, and rather husky voice, took in two or three deep, tremulous breaths, as he folded the pages nervously together. For a time nobody spoke. And then John, in whom the conclusion had for the moment released springs of an almost unbearable tenderness — a strange oasis of happiness in the midst of all his arid wastes of desolation did an unexpected thing. He was sitting next to Gerald, a little way behind, so that both their faces were in the shadow behind the downcast beams of the lamp. He bent over suddenly and touched Gerald’s forehead lightly with his lips. The latter at once perceived that the other two had seen.

“And you,” he said, turning back to John and startling them all by the sharpness with which he broke the silence, “have the effrontery to call yourself an Englishman!” Only his eyes betrayed the pleasure and exaltation which John’s curious action had caused him.

"That was one of the best things that you — that either of us — ever did, John!" he added softly — and he dropped his eyes, as he added, "and we'll never do it again as long as we live!"

"Not while you're awake!" murmured Janet vaguely. Humphrey turned quickly and looked at her with comically raised eyebrows.

John gradually observed that the three of them were regarding him intently, with a sort of expectant look, as if they were awaiting a burst of confidence, as if they would like to say, "Well?" And the disarming flood of tenderness having left him as suddenly as it came, he could not prevent a slight feeling of annoyance, as he withdrew into his shell from the centre of this enigmatic gaze.

"You have read us a very beautiful fairy-story," he said to Gerald, a little stiffly, and as if he were answering some question. "But —" and he looked round at them uneasily — "I suspect you all regard it as something more than a fairy-story — something to do with Brockmann, eh? What — I'm afraid I do not understand."

"You mean you're afraid we think it is true?"

"Yes."

"Like everything else," said Gerald, after an instant's reflection, "it is true in the proportion that it is imaginative." And he delivered his favourite quotation, "I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of imagination."

But John still seemed to be dissatisfied.

"Would you apply that to everything Brockmann has said?"

"Certainly."

"Then you don't believe everything he says?" He looked from Gerald to his brother and back again.

"Good Lord, no!" said Gerald. "Whoever told you I did?"

"Well, Janet rather gave me that idea!"

"Gerald," said Humphrey, breaking in on what he regarded as a barren argument, "you are not really going to give up writing. You can't tell us that now! Why not drop the Rubber and Hardware altogether?"

"Do you mean you think there is enough evidence in what you have heard to prove that I ought not to give it up?" Humphrey nodded.

"Of course there is," said Janet. "Don't be silly!" Gerald reflected for a few moments.

"No," he said. "I shan't give up Rubber and Hardware. In the first place, however much you may think of what I have just read — who's going to buy it? In the second place I think you probably overrate it."

"Why?"

"Well, to begin with, it's not original."

"Why," asked Humphrey, "is it a translation?"

"At least, not in the sense that I used to use the word original. It arose out of an attempt to imitate — you know whom — and then as I said, I owe everything to Brockmann!"

"Was that an imitation of Brockmann?" exclaimed John sharply.

"Oh no! I didn't say I'd imitated him. I said I owed everything to him."

"But if you disbelieve —"

"Who said anything about disbelieving?"

"Oh damn!" said John, recovering himself with a wrench from his little transient annoyance, and he relapsed forthwith into a good-humoured silence.

"I mean," said Gerald thoughtfully — "I don't know what I do mean quite. Put it this way: if he were alive, I would like to lay Tertium Quid at his feet . . . supposing he would accept it."

"Well, then," he went on briskly, "in the second place — and most important of all — it's not what's wanted! The place is crawling already — as you know very well — with third-rate artists, who go blue in the face if you mention Collateral and third-rate business-men who go blue in the face if you mention Keats (I didn't mean it to come out smart and alliterative, like that). I want to be a sort of liaison-officer — one of them, at any rate."

"But you don't like business," objected Janet, "you know you don't." Gerald turned to her.

"I don't know," he said. "I think I like doing things I don't like — at least sometimes, when I feel so full of sap that I shall burst if I don't."

"And lastly — I didn't really write it at all."

"Hulloa!" said Humphrey, "what's this?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean — well — everyone in this room wrote it! And — well — one person not in it . . . especially . . . at least one!" There was an unconvinced silence.

"I mean that absolutely!" repeated Gerald earnestly, looking at them all. It was Humphrey who replied.

"I thought you'd given up trying to pretend you haven't got an Ego!"

Gerald's mood changed like lightning:—

"SHUT UP!" he yelled at the top of his voice. "I warn everybody," he went on, gesticulating excitedly in Humphrey's direction, "If he doesn't stop, I shall go mad — probably in about five minutes from now!"

"I'd better go!" said Janet with an abruptness which somehow made them all laugh. She joined in the laughter, though she had scarcely understood what Gerald was saying. Her mind had been revolving uneasily about the idea of Metcalfe, and she felt at this moment less confidence in herself and in the rightness of her actions than she had done for many months past.

She tipped Merlin unceremoniously off her knee and rose.

Merlin arched his back, yawned enormously, stretched his forepaws and luxuriously clawed the carpet. Then he strolled across the room and suddenly, without any warning, laid one of his fat cheeks on John's boot, looking up at him at the same time with the usual adoring gaze. Then he turned over and wriggled on his back on the tip of the boot in a paroxysm of comfort and delight.

"Well, I'm dashed!" exclaimed John, looking up at the others, "that's the first time he's ever done that with me!" Gerald watched John for a moment, as he sat gazing almost shyly down at Merlin, and for the first time saw on his friend's face a look of such crushing sadness and humiliation as made himself feel like a shallow fool, a mere mountebank who had just been showing off his wares.

"Merlin is prophesying!" he exclaimed suddenly in a tone filled with warmth and admiration. "The Sorcerer! I remember Margaret's friend telling me he knew

everything. I'm sure he knows all about the future!" Janet, already on her feet, and bustling, did not hear this remark, and Gerald glanced quickly at Humphrey, to see what impression it might have made. But Humphrey had not heard it either. He sat motionless and upright in his chair, with his eyes fixed before him, and a curiously anxious look on his face, as if he were watching on some distant horizon the smoke of approaching battle.

THE END.