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VOL. 4920

THE GOOD COMPANIONS

BY

J. B. PRIESTLEY

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. 2

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CHAPTER II

VERY SHORT, AND DEVOTED TO REHEARSALS

INIGO seemed to spend all his waking hours, the next few days, on the improvised stage at the Rawsley Assembly Rooms, pounding away on the ancient Broadwood Grand. Two of the notes, the first G in the treble and the lower D in the bass, were in the habit of sticking, and even by the end of the first day he had come to know those two notes so well that they had taken on a personal life of their own, so that he appeared to have spent hours quarrelling with two obstinate little yellow men: Tweedlegee and Twoodledee, he called them. His wrists and forearms began aching by about twelve on Friday morning, and after that—though Sunday was a holiday—they went on aching until at last he forgot to notice them. It did not matter whether the Good Companions sang choruses, quartets, trios, duets, or individual numbers, he had to be at work. And if they stopped singing and took to dancing instead, then he had to work all the harder. For him there was no rest. Each member of the troupe prided himself or herself on having a large répertoire, known always as a "rep," and insisted on going through it at some time or other with the new pianist, who soon began to dislike the very mention of "reps."

"I never knew there were so many dirty tattered old sheets of music left in the world," Inigo confided to Miss Trant. This was after he had struggled through Jimmy Nunn's rep, which was the dirtiest, oldest, and most tattered of all. Many of Jimmy's songs, which did little more than announce that their singer was a policeman ("When you're

going down the street, You will see me on my beat, For I'm a Policeman—*pom*—Yes, I'm a Policeman") or a postman or a waiter or some other droll public character, were in manuscript, and were further complicated by instructions scrawled in in pencil—"Stop for patter," and so forth. Fortunately it did not matter very much what he played for Jimmy, who had no ear and no singing voice, and only demanded that the accompaniment should stop in various odd places in order that he should be able to point out that his father was a very mean man, or describe, with a wealth of unlikely detail, his wedding day. Indeed, the relation between Jimmy's singing and the piano was so vague that he had sung a whole verse of a policeman song to the accompaniment intended for a postman before either he or Inigo had noticed the mistake. "Have to use the old uns, my boy," said Jimmy, carefully removing from the piano a sheet that was dropping to pieces. "They don't write real comic songs now, you can take it from me." And Inigo was quite ready to agree that these masterpieces had obviously been written a great many years ago. His only hope was that he would be able to vamp the accompaniments by heart before most of the scores crumbled away altogether.

The respective reps of the two Brundits were in rather better condition than Jimmy's, being mostly composed of well-printed ballads, but they were far larger, especially Mrs. Joe's, a very stout portfolio with "Miss Stella Cavendish" printed on it in scarlet letters. "I don't think there's a bigger and classier rep on the C. P. stage to-day," she told him proudly. But it was not necessary to go through it all. Inigo was a quick reader and found this easy ballad stuff mere child's play. After Mrs. Joe, with flashing eye and heaving bosom, had tunefully cautioned a son o' hers against doing something or other, had suggested that the roses in her heart would never bloom again like the roses in her garden, had commanded the red sun to sink in-toe the We-est, had waited for one Angus MacDonald to return from some mysterious campaign, had

said good-bye to leaves and trees and kisses on the brow and practically everything, and had finally announced that she must go down to the sea again; in short, after Mrs. Joe had tried over about half a dozen of her most popular numbers, she expressed herself as being not only satisfied but delighted, mopped her face with one hand and patted Inigo on the shoulder with the other, and told him he was a pianist with a touch, a talent, a soul, and in short was a downright find. "You've got just the style for me, Mr. Jollifant," she cried warmly, and asked everybody present to agree with her. Inigo, who had been quietly enjoying himself by indulging in an ironical over-emphasis, looked round to see that Miss Susie Dean, who was standing near, was regarding him with a cool and speculative eye. At once the praise of the simple songstress made him feel uncomfortable. He glanced apologetically towards Susie—he thought of her now as Susie—but that young lady immediately tilted her nose a little higher than usual and looked away. Inigo then came to the conclusion that he was not such a clever young man as he had imagined himself to be.

Joe gave Inigo more trouble than Mrs. Joe had done, though his rep was neither so big nor so classy. "Joe's got the Voice but not the Training," his wife explained. "And if he's not going to get off the note again, he'll have to have some of his numbers transposed. I told that to the creature that ran off with Mildenhall, but of course it was no use talking to *her*. She couldn't play a straight accompaniment, let alone transpose. As I told Joe this morning, you're a real musician, so you won't mind putting some of his numbers down a semi-tone or a tone." And Inigo did put some of them down a semi-tone or a tone, but nobody except Mrs. Joe, who was quite triumphant, even imagined it made any difference. Joe's rough, powerful voice still refused to keep on the note; towards the end of a song it wavered between several different notes; and usually at the very end it wandered into another key altogether. Moreover, it cannot be denied that Joe was a very

wooden vocalist. He stiffened his massive body, clenched his fists, and roared until he was purple in the face. It was not so bad when his themes were nautical and it was his duty to point out the various perils of the de-ee-eep, but when he tried to turn himself into a melodious victim of the tender passion, when he declared that he heard you whisper his name among the roses or admitted that he had been standing 'neath your window in the moonlight or confessed that he thought of nothing night and day but two bright eyes and two white arms, and stood there bellowing, fifteen stone of taut muscle and stiff bone, with his big chin jutting out, his forehead gemmed with beads of perspiration, and his two fists apparently ready at any moment to deliver a knock-out, then it was very hard indeed not to smile at honest Joe. Miss Trant, who chanced to enter the hall when one of his love lyrics was in full blast, had to retire to the back so that he would not catch sight of her face. "What on earth makes Mr. Brundit sing love songs?" she asked Susie afterwards. "I don't mind what he sings, of course, but anybody less love-sick I can't imagine." Susie laughed. "I know. Poor Joe!—he sounds as if he's shouting for steak and onions, doesn't he? Mrs. Joe—our Stella—makes him sing them. They don't go down badly, either. People must think it hurts him more than it hurts them, so they give him a hand. I adore Joe, though. He's a lot nicer than the men who *can* sing love songs, I can tell you. I've known some of them. Ugh!"

When the two girls of the party came to rehearse their individual numbers with him, Inigo had an unpleasant surprise. He found that he enjoyed playing to Elsie more than he did to Susie. Elsie came first and ran through about half a dozen songs, mostly of American origin, songs at once plaintive and impudent, in which somebody had either never had a "sweetie" or had just lost one. Elsie sang these in a little tinny nasal voice that seemed itself an importation from the United States, and after the last two she danced in quite an engaging and graceful fashion, making the most of her shapely self. To Inigo, looking over

the piano at her as soon as he could dispense with the few repeated bars of music that accompanied the dance-steps, she seemed very attractive, in spite of the fact that he had always thought her too fair and fluffy, too saucer-eyed, too scented, at once too demure and too flaunting, too much the ageing kitten, and had never had five minutes' amusing talk with her. Until then, indeed, he had seen her as a rather silly and empty woman—and, after all, she was a woman, several years his senior—and had set her down as "affected and cosmeticated, and a bit hard and mean inside." But now, when she twirled away, smiled at him, cried "Quicker, please," smiled again as they increased the pace together, she seemed to have distinct charm, and he saw an audience warming to her act, thin and conventional though it might be. And when, at the end, pink and rather breathless, she clapped her hands and came over to him, crying "Oh, thanks ever so much! That was topping. You do play beautifully, don't you?", and he replied "That was fun, wasn't it, Miss Longstaff?", and she said that she couldn't be Miss Longstaff any longer but must be Elsie and he must be Inigo—then he began to feel they were really friends.

This was a surprise but not unpleasant. It was Susie who surprised him unpleasantly. To begin with, she was so disappointing. Jimmy Nunn, the Brundits, and even Jerningham, had all told him how wonderful Susie was; easily the best little comedienne on the Concert Party stage, they said, and a coming star on any stage; not simply hard-working and clever with a touch or two of originality but—you know. And he knew. He had watched her closely ever since they first met, which was only last Thursday but already seemed months ago, and was only too willing to believe anything they said of her. He could see her on the stage—the nimble but sturdy figure of her, the piquant dark face, flashing with fun, and the performance itself, a rush of high spirits, a mixture of charm and drollery with just a glint, the tiniest glint, of pathos. And then when she came to rehearse with him, it was not like that at all. She

sang a few songs in a husky little voice; they were poor things, flimsier than Elsie's, even, and she went through them listlessly, half-heartedly. She did a little step-dancing, but that was half-hearted too. Now and again she stopped him: he was too slow, too fast, or he must halt in such a place. That was all. It was woefully disappointing.

"I say," he began, when she had done and was putting her music together.

"Well, what is it, Professor?"

"Those songs of yours—they're not much good, are they?" He saw her opening her eyes to stare at him. "I mean—pretty feeble—eh?"

"Oh, do you think so?" There was rising and dangerous inflection in her voice.

"Rather! Thin stuff, tissue paper, absolutely! You must get fed up singing 'em, don't you? Quite apart from the words, think of the tunes. What are they? Lord, I could invent half-a-dozen better ones in a morning."

"Could you really?"

"With ease," the rash young man continued. "I don't say mine wouldn't be tripe, but there's tripe and tripe, isn't there?"

"I suppose so," she said, softly now. "I never touch it myself. But go on, please, go on."

"Well, I mean to say," he went on, a little less sure of himself, "if those things are the best that are going, we'll pension 'em off and concoct some of our own. What d'you think?"

"I'll tell you what I think," she said fiercely. "I think you've got a damned cheek. Now then! Sitting there coolly telling me my songs are all rot! And you haven't been in the show five minutes. Never seen an audience in your life! D'you think I'm in your—your—infant class! Oh yerse," she went on, holding up her head and speaking in a throaty voice that was a vindictive imitation of Inigo's, "ther's trape and trape, isn't ther? Oh, ab-so-lutely!" Then, with a furious sweep, she turned and caught sight of Jimmy Nunn, who was in conference in the body of the

hall. "Jimmy," she called, "just a minute, Jimmy. You'll perhaps be sorry to hear that I shan't be able to appear in the show. No, impossible! Mr. Jollifant, who's so kindly condescended to play for us, says my songs aren't worth playing."

"I didn't," Inigo protested.

"Yes, of course you did," she retorted. "And what I'd like to know is—who do you think you are? The last pianist we had was pretty foul, but at least she didn't tell us what we had to sing."

"Now then, you kids," Jimmy called to them. "Remember you're going to have something tasty for your tea, and I'm not. Pity poor James! Ease up, Susie. And you apologise, Jollifant. I don't care if you haven't done anything, say you're sorry. It's the only way with 'em. Take it easy, the pair of you."

"I'm awfully sorry, Susie——"

"Miss Dean, thank you."

"All right. Miss Dean, then," replied Inigo with dignity. "I repeat: I'm awfully sorry if I've offended you. I didn't mean to."

"Yes, that's the only way with 'em, isn't it? Well, it isn't with me." Susie picked up her music. "I'm sorry you don't like these numbers because you're going to hear them quite a lot. Anyhow, I'm going to sing them. And if you wrote the best soubrette songs in the world, here and now, I wouldn't sing them, not if you paid me to sing them. And that's that." And off she marched, her head in the air.

Jimmy came up a few minutes afterwards, and Inigo told him what had happened. Jimmy whistled for a minute, then puckered up his face and looked drolly at his companion. "There's one thing they didn't teach you at Cambridge, my boy," he said finally, "and it's something you'll have to learn at this job. That's tact. Don't say these things. Think 'em but don't put 'em in the book of words. In this profession, the men are bad enough. But the women! Touchy! Dynamite, my boy. One word and up they go! Besides, Susie's numbers are good enough. I

don't say they couldn't be better. But you see what she does with 'em on the night. They all eat out of her hand."

"But that's the point," said Inigo. "I should never have said anything—this is between ourselves—if I hadn't been so disappointed. I expected something wonderful from her, and I thought she was awfully dull."

On hearing this, Jimmy gave an excellent imitation of a distinguished astronomer who has just been told that the world is flat. He groaned; he looked heavenwards; he beat his brow. "What d'you think this is?" he cried, waving a hand at the empty hall. "A command performance? D'you think them chairs with the bit of plush left on are the Royal Family? D'you think that pillar there's Sir Oswald Stoll, with his pockets full of new contracts?"

"Let me take a turn at this," cried Inigo, good humouredly enough, though in truth he was still rather nettled. "And do I think this piano is the box office of Drury Lane? The answer is—I don't. And what then?"

Jimmy laughed. "Only this. Susie wasn't bothering, that's all. Wait till you see her in front of an audience. I tell you, she can make a hit with the duddest number you ever shut your ears to. Leave it to her, my boy. Susie's all right."

"I see." Inigo played a little phrase, softly, reflectively, then ended with a sudden crash. "You can expect some songs from me now, Jimmy, that is, if we can get some words. The tunes come easily enough, but I can't write the sort of stuff they want as words for them."

"If my inside lets me alone for a day or two," said Jimmy, "I can do a bit that way myself. We'll get together and fit 'em in. This is how it works. If you've got a good melody, then I'll try to find words for it. If I've a likely lyric, you try to find a tune. And don't forget to try your hand on that opening chorus I've got ready."

"Right you are. I'm going to show Miss Susie that I wasn't exactly talking through my hat just now. She said she wouldn't dream of singing anything I ever wrote. We'll see about that. I'll write something that'll make her eat

her words, or I'll bust." And, so fired by the scorn of Susie, who must be *shown*, he set to work in earnest, and the two of them spent all the next day, Sunday, with a wreck of a cottage piano, the pride of Jimmy's lodgings, and some music manuscript paper that Jimmy had unearthed.

On Monday morning, Inigo rehearsed with Jerry Jerningham, who carefully divested himself of his coat and waistcoat and then, for the next hour, worked like the nigger of legend. His voice was no better than it is now, was indeed the same plaintive and rather nasal croon, hardly worth calling a voice at all, yet most artfully adapted for the work it had to do. Jazz, which had begun as an explosion of barbaric high spirits, a splash of crimson and black on a drab globe, had become civilised; it was quieter, more subtle, and flirted with sentiment and cynicism; its first bold colours faded to autumnal tints; its butterfly gaieties were for ever fluttering down into melancholy; its insistent rhythms were like the soft plug-plugging of those great machines that now keep whole populations waiting upon them, devouring so much of people's time and yet leaving their minds partly free to wander—and to wonder; and in its own crude, jigging, glancing fashion, as it sang with a grin and shrug of home and love to the crowds of the homeless and unloved, it contrived to express all the sense of baffled desire and the sad nostalgia of the age. History, which attends to folk songs as well as the migrations of peoples, had produced this Jazz, and Nature, working obscurely in a long dark street in a Midland city, had produced a Jerry Jerningham, this Antinous in evening dress and dancing slippers, to match the event. Jerry's voice was nothing, yet it would have been impossible to find a better for these songs. And his feet, those two astonishingly energetic and versatile commentators, said all the rest. As soon as he began pit-patting with those feet, Jerry suddenly became a real person, confessing things, making original remarks about life. His feet pondered, sank into despair, began to hope, took courage, laughed and carolled, became crazed with happiness, were touched with doubt,

wondered uneasily, shrugged and turned cynical, all with a seemingly careless grace.

Inigo had found it difficult to like this beautiful and vacant young man, but now he found it easy enough to respect him. Jerningham might have a mind as blank as a new slate, and the most atrociously affected accent in the country; he might be all narrow ambition and conceit; but he was an artist—not merely an artiste, but an artist. And how he worked! It was his ambition to be the most graceful lounger, the best of all the idle fops of revue and musical comedy, and to achieve these butterfly perfections he trained like an athlete and toiled like a slave. Off the stage, Inigo had discovered that Jerningham could be easily ignored; but now at rehearsal he saw another young man, who knew exactly what he wanted, not merely from himself but from everybody else, and had made up his mind not to be baulked; he was in his own atmosphere, and at once flashed into life, like a fish put back into water. Inigo played with unusual zest to the very end. Jerningham leaned against the piano, smiled across it and then carefully wiped his forehead with a lilac silk handkerchief.

"By George!—but you can dance, though," cried Inigo enthusiastically. "Hope my playing was all right? This syncopated stuff's rotten to read at sight."

"Jally faine," said Jerningham. "Ai laike your playing. Jest what Ai warnted. You've got the Jaizz tech. You'll make a lat of difference to our baind too." He mopped himself delicately again. "Gled you laike my darncing. Ai'm pretty good at those steps, but Ai warnt some new ones very bardly."

Inigo flourished a manuscript. "You listen to this," he cried. "It's a song Jimmy and I wrote yesterday. The tune's one I've had in my head for some time, and now Jimmy's put some words to it."

"What's the taitle?"

"*Slippin' round the Corner,*" Inigo told him. I'll play it to you while you're resting." And once again the mischievous little tune came dancing out of the keys. Long before Inigo had finished, Jerningham was looking over his shoulder at the manuscript and humming and tapping his feet.

"Oh, but it's a wanderful little namber!" cried Jerningham, with unexpected enthusiasm. "There's nathing going to tech it, nathing, Jallifarnt. And it's mai namber, isn't it? Must be mai namber, Ai insist."

"Yes, you can sing it," Inigo replied, with grim satisfaction. He was thinking of Susie.

Jerningham was going through the words now. "Ai must tray this now, Ai ralely must. You know you look like being a gold-maine, Jallifarnt. Now do pramise you'll let me sing this for at least two or three months before you send it anywhere?"

"Oh, that's all right. I wasn't thinking of sending it anywhere."

"But mai dear boy, of course you must. There's pats of meney in things like this, pats. Shahly you knew thart!" And Jerningham opened wide his velvety brown eyes to stare at this strange fellow. "But let's tray it now. Here's Jaymy and Mitcham. We're just going to tray this namber of yours, Jaymy."

Jerningham took the manuscript—Inigo knowing the music by heart—and went through one verse and chorus rather slowly. Then he tried the second verse and took the chorus at quicker pace, his feet making little movements to the lilt of it. "Now we'll tray it all over again, please, Jallifarnt, and we'll put the snep into it. Raight you are." And when he came to repeat the chorus, he was accompanied by Mr. Mitcham's banjo and Jimmy on the drums. The four of them sent everything slipping gloriously round the corner, and Inigo danced on the piano stool, improvised the most astounding variations and flourishes, and laughed in his excitement. "Repeat, repeat," cried Jerningham, and immediately stopped singing and began dancing properly, while the other three, their heads wagging away, slipped and slipped and slipped round the corner.

"But where, where, where did you get that duck, that

perfect little fat duck of a number?" It was Susie who came rushing on the stage. They had not noticed she was about. They had not noticed anything. "Never mind," she cried. "Tell me afterwards. Let's have it again, do let's have it again. I want to try it with Jerry."

So off they went again, repeating the chorus, with Susie, very excitedly humming and putting in all manner of strange words, dancing away with Jerningham. After a minute or two, the men stopped.

"Go on, go on, boys," she cried. "You're not going to stop, are you? Can't I have it again?"

No, she couldn't, they told her. They were all blown.

"Well, now you can tell me," said Susie. "Whose is it and where did it come from? Tell me all about it."

"It's mai new namber, Susie," Jerningham panted.

"And there's the boy who wrote it," said Mr. Mitcham, pointing to Inigo. "And as soon as he let me hear it, I said 'That's a winner, my boy.' I can tell 'em. Went back to my hotel once in Chicago and there was a waiter there—little Jew boy—heard him picking out a tune on the piano, very quietly—nobody about, you see. I went straight up to him——"

But he had to finish his anecdote in the wings, where Jimmy and Jerningham were taking deep breaths. Susie had not stayed to listen to it. She had rushed over to Inigo at the piano.

"Do you mean to say you wrote that?" she demanded.

He smiled at her. "Well, Jimmy wrote the words, but I wrote the tune. It's—er—one of those little things of mine I believe I mentioned to you the other day. A poor thing but mine own; absolutely."

Susie stared at him, breathing hard. "And you've let Jerry Jerningham have it?"

"Yes, why not?"

"Well, you are a mean pig to give it to him like that, and not even let me hear it first. I didn't think you could be so—so—unfriendly, so spiteful."

"But you said——"

"I know what I said. But of course I didn't *mean* it. You ought to have known I didn't mean it. Besides, I thought if you did write anything, it would be dreadful—they usually are—and not something really good like that. And just because——" She paused.

"Because what?" He had stopped smiling now. He was busy trying to make head or tail of these remonstrances that came flashing out without any kind of logical sequence that he could discover, and at the same time he was telling himself how pretty she was. No, it wasn't just prettiness. Nor could you call it beauty. But there it was, infinitely delightful and disturbing.

Now she suddenly dropped her indignation. "It doesn't matter, of course. It's nothing. But I thought we were going to be friends, and it's obvious we're not. That's all. I suppose you're writing another now for Elsie Longstaff. No, I'm really cross now. I wasn't before, and you ought to have seen I wasn't. And I'm not cross now. Yes, I know. I thought I was but I wasn't. I'm just—well, I'm disappointed. That's all." She lowered her eyes as her voice trailed away. There was a moment's silence. Then she tried to look brisk and cheerful. (And Inigo, bewildered but not yet entirely unobservant, did not know which it was.) "It really is a good little number," she said, with all the brittle brightness of a conscientious hostess. "And I must say, you're very clever. You'll make quite a lot of money if you keep on turning out things like that." And she strolled away, her head in the air.

This was Inigo's triumph, but he did not enjoy it. He sat there feeling rather ashamed of himself, though somewhere at the back of his mind was a cool little fellow who whispered that he had no reason to be ashamed of himself, that he had just been humbugged out of his triumph. Then she came back, ran across the stage, her face alight.

"I don't want you to think I'm bad-tempered, because I'm not, really I'm not," she cried, putting her elbows on the piano and resting her chin in her hands. In this position she could look at him steadily, and she did look at him

steadily. "Now, aren't you sorry you gave that number to Jerry Jerningham instead of me? I know I haven't shown you yet what I can do, and I know that Jerry's very clever in his own way. I believe you were very disappointed in me the other day, weren't you?" she inquired, rather plaintively.

"Well, I don't know——" Inigo stammered, feeling it impossible to look away and equally impossible to say what he had thought with his eyes still fixed on hers.

"Are you really a spiteful person? You don't look like one. I thought at first you were rather nice."

"I am," he replied, trying to be the good-humoured, rather whimsical middle-aged gentleman, and not succeeding at all. "I'm usually considered specially nice. 'Here comes that nice Mr. Jollifant,' they say." He put on the indulgent smile of forty-five, but felt it wobble.

"Are you? I wonder." She stared at him with a kind of innocent speculation for a moment. "But you mustn't try to patronise me just because you're about three years older than I am, you know. We're just the same age really."

This was his chance. "Yes, yes," he murmured. "And now you're going to tell me that a girl is always years older than a man. I know. You've been reading magazine stories and light fiction from Boots'."

"I wasn't going to say anything of the kind," she protested, almost too swiftly. "I was going to say I'd seen a lot more of life than you have. Then I thought I wouldn't. 'It might hurt his nice little conceit of himself,' I said to myself. So I didn't. If you want to be friends with a man, you mustn't ever say anything to hurt his precious vanity, and as that's always as big as a row of houses and tender all over, you have to be awfully careful."

"Oh, do you want to be friends, then?"

"Perhaps." She stood up now, gave a twirl or two. "I haven't made up my mind—quite."

"Do make up your mind. I'm all for it, absolutely," he said, turning into an eager youth again. "What's the good of being a Good Companion, if you're not friends."

"Mr. Oakroyd's my new friend," she remarked, still twirling. "Ahr Jess. Did you know his name's Jess? It's Jesiah, really. Isn't that too sweet? He comes to me and asks all about curtains and footlights and spot-lights and props, and he goes about looking so important when he's anything to do. He's already mended my basket for me. He says 'It'll do champion nar, Soos.' He calls me 'Soos,' and tells me all about Shuddersford and the Gurt North Roo-ad. We're very thick, I can tell you. I heard him saying to Miss Trant, 'Her and ahr Lily's as like as two peeas.' What d'you think of that?" She hummed a bar or two of *Slippin' round the Corner,* and tried a few steps. Then she smiled at Inigo.

"Do you know what you're going to do now, Mr. Inigo Jollifant?" she cried softly. "You're going to write another song, just as good as that, if not a wee bit better, and that number will be all for me. I can see it coming. And—listen—I'll promise to put all I know into it, and then one day a big manager from the West End will hear me singing it, and he'll send for you and he'll send for me, and we'll both make our fortunes. You'll have Francis, Day, and Hunter sitting on your doorstep, and I'll have fifteen agents fighting on the stairs. Now don't say you can't do it, because I know you can, you're so clever. Do you know, I said at once when I saw you, 'That boy with the lock of hair and the ridiculous knapsack doesn't look like a pro, but he looks a *clever* boy.' That's exactly what I said. And now, isn't that what you're going to do?"

And, strangely enough, Inigo admitted that it was. He even went so far as to add that already he had a tune in his head that might do, if Jimmy could dig up some words. "And are we friends again now?" he inquired.

"But of course we are," she replied. "Though we don't know each other very well, do we? But we're going to work very hard together." Then she looked him over rather severely. "But, you know, you mustn't take these little things so seriously. Mind that."

Before he could reply, she was giving a lightning imita-

tion of a pompous gentleman fingering a large, pointed, and very important moustache. "Little things, you know, Mistah—ar—Jollifant," she croaked. "Me-ah differences of o-pin-yon, what! The kaind of thing that may happen at any mo-oh-ment—what!" Then she instantly became herself again, blew him a kiss, and tripped away.

Inigo stared after her and drew a very deep breath. Having had such innocents as Felton and Daisy Callander of Washbury Manor to deal with, he had come to see himself inevitably taking the lead, leaping from position to position and beckoning to the duller-witted who lumbered after him; but he could not help feeling that he had now more than met his match. Susie left him gasping. Being friends with her was going to be very exciting. It appeared that his imagination had probably not deceived him when, hearing her voice in the tea-room, it had seen a curtain go shooting up. That curtain was still going up, higher and higher.

CHAPTER III

INIGO JUMPS OUT OF A TRAIN AND FINDS HIMSELF IN LOVE

I

"Now this," said Mrs. Joe impressively, taking up the last little heap of cards, "is what's sure to come true."

"What was all the rest then?" Inigo asked.

"Look here, Inigo," cried Susie, "whose fortune is this, mine or yours? You're not a bit funny. Go on, my dear. Don't take any notice of him."

Mrs. Joe was examining the cards with sibylline gravity. "I see here great success for you, my dear. Money, admiration, power, everything—a really great success. And it'll come quite unexpectedly in a Five."

"Five what? Can't you tell?"

"No, it's just a Five. And it'll all come through a dark man, a very dark man."

"Perhaps it's a nigger," suggested Jimmy Nunn.

"Oh, shut up, Jimmy!" cried Susie. "You're old enough

to know better. How am I going to meet this man? That's what I want to know."

"Talking of niggers," said Mr. Morton Mitcham to nobody in particular, "I was in New Orleans one time and there was an old nigger mammy there who could tell fortunes. She did it with melon seeds. She told me I was going to break my arm within a week. 'Don't you go to de North or de West, sah,' she said to me. But I did, though. And just a week after that, in Nashville——" He paused and looked from one to another of them.

Joe took his pipe out of his mouth. "You broke your arm, like she said," he prompted.

"No, I didn't do just that," said Mr. Mitcham solemnly, "and I won't pretend I did. But just one week after that I was with a fellow—and I'll tell you who he was; he was old Horace Carson who used to go round with the *Woman in a Barrel* illusion—and he broke his leg. Queer, wasn't it? And another time, out East, there was an old Chink——"

"Well, Susie, you can't want a better fortune than that, my dear," said Mrs. Joe. "You'll have a lot of worries and trouble in a Two, as I said, but after that everything's going to be bright for you, and I'm sure I wish I could say the same for us all."

"Don't you think you could if you tried hard enough?" asked Inigo, looking innocent.

"There he goes again!" cried Susie. "Pretending he thinks it's all nonsense, and all the time he's dying to have a good fortune himself and is furious because he can't have one."

"Don't be a scoffer, Mr. Jollifant," said Mrs. Joe earnestly. "I've known people to scoff at these things once too often, like that young fellow who came to the Rawston Repertory when we were there. What was his name, Joe?" she called across to him.

"What was whose name?" asked Joe.

"That young fellow who came to the Rawston and

who'd once been in a lawyer's office or somewhere and didn't believe in bad luck and good luck and all that."

"Oh, that chap," said Joe. "I remember him well. Best solo whist player I ever struck, he was. Knew every card in your hand. I remember him all right."

"What was his name?" screamed his wife. "Don't keep telling me you remember him. All I want is his name."

Joe thought for a moment. "I've forgotten his name," he confessed.

"Just like you, Joe," and she dismissed him with affectionate scorn. "That's Joe all over," she explained to the others at her end of the compartment. "He'd keep on for an hour telling me he remembered him, if I'd let him, and then he doesn't even remember the man's name. Well, as I was saying, this young fellow came to the company and told us all there was too much of this superstition on the stage and he didn't believe in it, and to show us he didn't believe in it, he went out of his way to do all the things that bring bad luck, and put things in the dressing-room, spoke the tag at rehearsals, and everything. He'd show us it was all rubbish, he said. Well, what came of it?" She asked this in a low thrilling voice and fixed her gaze upon Inigo.

"Well, did anything come of it?" asked Inigo, who felt that he was capable of following this young man's example himself.

"I should think it did," cried Mrs. Joe triumphantly. "He had his notice in less than a month."

"Served him right, too," said Susie very severely. "But how did it happen?"

"Oh, we all complained to the management about him," replied Mrs. Joe. "Either he goes or we do, we said, and so he had to go." She stared at Inigo, who had suddenly burst out laughing. "Funny to you it may be, Mr. Jollifant, but it wasn't funny to us and it went to our hearts to have to do it but we couldn't have him deliberately ruining the luck for everybody. And he brought on his own bad luck, didn't he?"

"But don't you see——" Inigo began, but then stopped because it was obvious that she did not see. Moreover, Susie was telling him to be quiet and not to talk about things he did not understand.

"Ai don't believe mech in these things," Mr. Jerry Jerningham announced, fluttering his long eyelashes at the company.

"You don't believe in anything," said Miss Longstaff, who appeared to have wakened up specially to make this remark. "All you believe in is yourself and White's dancing shoes and that stuff that says handsome men are slightly sunburnt." It was clear that Mr. Jerningham could not be numbered among Elsie's gentlemen friends.

"Dewn't you be so personal," said Mr. Jerningham, permitting his exquisite features to register indignation. "You're always passing remawks. And Ai know whai. Oh yes, Ai know whai." There was—as the ladies told one another afterwards—bouquet written all over him.

Susie began chanting a little composition of her own:

"Pretty Mister Jerningham
Came from Birmingham,
Where he'd been learning 'em,
And some say turning 'em
Up up up."

"Now then, you girls," said Jimmy, "leave the boy alone. You're only jealous. If there's no more fortune-telling going on at that end, we'll have the cards back, please. What about another game of solo, Joe?"

"It's getting quite warm in here," Mr. Mitcham observed, and began taking off his overcoat.

"Exit the Silver King," murmured Susie. This was the name they had given Mr. Mitcham's overcoat, which was no ordinary garment. It had first made its appearance at Haxby (where Mr. Mitcham had bought it in a second-hand clothier's for twenty-eight shillings), and immediately it had seemed as if another person had joined the party. Mr.

Mitcham was now described as "travelling an overcoat," just as some players are said to "travel" a mother or other relative. It was a gigantic plaid ulster and its collar was decorated with a few inches of fur from some mysterious and long extinct species. It had the air of having been round the world far more times than Mr. Mitcham himself, and of having seen places that its owner would never be permitted to see. At any moment (as Inigo had remarked), you felt that this astounding overcoat might begin to supplement Mr. Mitcham's travel reminiscences or set him right in a loud voice. And Jimmy Nunn swore that he had to take out an extra railway ticket for it and that every time it was taken into a third-class carriage its fur stood on end. Such was the Silver King, which Mr. Mitcham now folded and, after some difficulty, found a place for on the rack.

After Haxby *The Good Companions* had had several three-night and two-night stands in the same neighbourhood, and it was now the middle of November. This Sunday journey to Middleford was the longest they had undertaken so far, for Middleford, as everybody ought to know, is one of those grim coal-and-iron towns of the North-East. Miss Trant had taken Mr. Oakroyd with her in the car, on which he now kept a knowing eye, but all the other eight of them, as we have seen, were travelling in this train and they filled the compartment. They had been there for the last three hours, exchanging stories, playing cards, telling fortunes, eating sandwiches and chocolate, reading, smoking, yawning, dozing, staring out of the windows at the vague grey places that went wobbling past. It was a raw day—and, as usual, seemed all the more raw because it was Sunday—and at first the railway carriage had been miserably cold, but now it was not merely snug but downright stuffy. Jimmy Nunn, Joe, Mitcham, and Jerningham played a few more languid hands of solo whist; Mrs. Joe knitted; Elsie closed her eyes again; Susie read a few more pages of *The Pianola Mystery;* and Inigo wrestled with several large Sunday newspapers.

"Hello!" said Jimmy, wiping the window and peering

out. "This looks like Hicklefield. We're running to time to-day."

"Don't we change here?" asked Inigo.

"We do," Jimmy replied. "And we've just twenty minutes. Time to get a drink."

"Everybody changes here," said Mrs. Joe, putting away her knitting. "I seem to have spent half my life in this station. Every time I've ever gone North, they've run me into Hicklefield to change trains."

The others agreed that Hicklefield was inevitable, and told one another how often they had met people they knew in the refreshment-room. They were now running slowly into the gloomy cavern of the station itself. Then a curious thing happened. Jimmy Nunn, who had let down the window and was looking out, gave a little cry and then suddenly sat down in his corner.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he gasped, staring before him. All the colour had drained out of his queer puckered face. He looked ill.

"Jimmy! Jimmy! What's the matter?" they were all crying.

He was pressing his hand now on his heart. His lips were blue. "All right. It's nothing," he groaned. "Just a bit of—of—an attack, that's all. Get me—that bag down—ol' man—you'll find a flask in it. That's it. Ah—that's better!" The colour returned to his face, beginning with his nose, so that for a moment or two he looked as if he had his comic make-up on and there seemed a horrible touch of drollery in his still chattering teeth.

"Jimmy, my dear!" said Susie, her hand on his shoulder. "What's happened? You did give me a fright. Don't do it again, will you?"

There was no time for more. The train had stopped now. Inigo and Morton Mitcham said they would see the baggage into the next train, which was already waiting at a neighbouring platform. The others were going off at once to the refreshment-room, but Jimmy, who was still shaky, refused to accompany them, so Susie insisted upon taking

him over to the Middleford train. But when Inigo had finished with the baggage, he found Jimmy sitting there alone.

"Where's Susie?" he asked.

"I packed her off to get a cup o' tea for herself," Jimmy replied. "Is Mitcham trying for a quick one?"

"He is," said Inigo, helping the porter with the smaller things, which they were spreading on the seats. "There's still ten minutes, but I'm not going to bother. I don't like these lightning drinks."

After a few minutes, Joe and his wife came along, announcing that they had seen and spoken with Tommy Verney and Mabel Ross, late of *The Merry Mascots*. "They're resting now," panted Mrs. Joe, "then opening at Warrington in *Cinderella*—Baron Hardup and Dandini." Then Elsie and Jerry Jerningham disengaged themselves from a group of people (the *Money for Dust!* Company on the Broadhead Tour) at the end of the platform, and came hurrying along, chanting the names of all the acquaintances they had seen. Then Mr. Morton Mitcham, magnificent in the Silver King, stalked up, to point out that he had had two while some fellows, there before he was, had not been able to secure a single drink. "It's an art as much as anything else," he concluded triumphantly, and Jimmy and Joe acknowledged that he was undoubtedly a fast worker.

"Where's Susie?" asked Inigo.

Mr. Mitcham thought he had seen her in the refreshment-room, talking to some people. "There's three minutes yet," he added. "She can make it—easy. Did I ever tell you how I once caught the Twentieth Century Limited?"

At this moment, however, a porter slammed the door. Jimmy and Mrs. Joe both tried to look out of the window at the same time. "By jingo!" cried Jimmy anxiously, "but she'll have to hurry up. I can't see her, and they're getting their flags and whistles ready."

"Just a minute!" said Inigo. "Do let me have a look."

"Can't see her anywhere," said Jimmy.

A whistle sounded.

"There she is!" cried Jimmy. "Eh, what's your name, guard?—half a minute! Oh, the silly devils! Gosh, we're off! She's missed it!"

"Then so have I," roared Inigo. "Get back, Jimmy. I'm getting out." The train was actually moving now, though very slowly. He opened the door, dropped out, and fell flat on his back on the platform.

Jimmy fumbled desperately in his pocket while the others were shouting. "Here!" he cried. "Tickets!" He threw out two tickets, which fell on the platform and were picked up by a porter, whose attention was then directed to Inigo by the frantic gesticulations of Jimmy. The next moment they were out of the station.

"Well I'll be——" Joe did not say what he would be, but simply blew out his breath. The others, however, appeared to agree with him. "For the minute," said Mrs. Joe, "I didn't know I'd a heart in my body."

"Well, I've thought for some time he was sweet on Susie," said Elsie, "but I didn't know it was as bad as that."

"I've seen it all along," said Mrs. Joe, with a huge sentimental sigh. "That's what I call love, that is."

"Oh, he's gone on her, is he?" said Joe, staring innocently at his wife. "Is that why he went and jumped out?"

"Of course it is, Joe. Don't be silly," said his wife sharply. "And you needn't look so surprised about it. He hasn't gone wrong in his head. If I was stranded like that, you'd jump out of a train, wouldn't you?"

Joe rubbed his chin and looked bewildered. "I suppose so," he said finally.

"You don't seem very sure about it."

"All right then, I would," said Joe. "You try me and see."

"And then go and break your neck, I suppose," said his wife, still sharply. "And then we'd be in a fine mess, wouldn't we? I've never heard a man talk in such a silly way as you do sometimes, Joe," she concluded severely.

Joe looked at her in despair. Then he looked at Mr. Morton Mitcham, who in his turn was looking at Jimmy. All three gentlemen exchanged glances, and they were glances of a deep philosophical significance, such as may be exchanged among members of a sex not entirely devoid of reason, not wholly given over to whims and fancies and irrational outbursts.

II

"And did you really jump out just to keep me company?" said Susie. "I think it's sweet of you, Inigo."

Inigo himself, though he did not say so, thought it was rather sweet of him too. He had just been admonished by the North-Eastern Railway, had still a good deal of that railway's dust on his clothes, and had not quite recovered from his encounter with that railway's platform. The porter had handed over the two tickets that Jimmy had thrown out, but Inigo had neither overcoat nor hat, and felt chilly, shaken up and somewhat ridiculous.

"The very first thing we must do now," said Susie rather sternly, just as if he had proposed a few games of chess, "is to find out when the next train goes to Middleford."

"Yes, I'd thought of that myself," said Inigo meekly.

Together, they examined the indicator, which informed them that the next train to Middleford would leave No. 2 Platform at 7.45 P.M.

"Over four hours to wait here," said Inigo.

"And when will it arrive at Middleford?" asked Susie. "That's what it doesn't say. About the crack of dawn, I suppose."

"The time-table over there will tell us that," said Inigo, and led her towards it. After much pointing and running up and down of fingers, they discovered that the 7.45 arrived in Middleford at 11 o'clock.

"That'll be all right," said Susie. "Jimmy or one of the others will be sure to meet us. They'll look up the train too, and they'll have got us some digs. This isn't

the first time this has happened to me, as Jimmy will tell you."

Here she was stopped by a cough. It came from a middle-aged woman dressed in black who had been glancing at the time-table next to theirs. She had a long angular face, and her lips were tightly compressed. Inigo had noticed her when they first came up, for she was looking at the time-table as if there might be something wildly indecent in it. And now she coughed, not apologetically but peremptorily; it was like a tap on the shoulder. They looked at her, and she looked steadily from one to the other of them.

"Maybe you're theatricals?" she asked at last.

Yes, they were.

"Changing trains here?" she asked.

Changing and losing trains, they told her, and then exchanged quick glances. "Busybody?" Inigo's glance asked. "Probably looking for lodgers," Susie's replied.

"And when did you come in?" she inquired. After they had told her that too, and had even indicated the direction of the train, she looked at them more fixedly than ever, and finally said: "You don't happen to have been travelling with a Mr. Nunn?"

"What, Jimmy Nunn!" cried Susie.

"James Nunn," she replied firmly.

"I should think we were," said Susie. "We're all in the same show, *The Good Companions*. And Jimmy's an old friend of mine. D'you know him?"

The angular woman paid no attention to this question. "Pierrot troupe, is it?" she said. "And where are you going to now?"

Middleford, they told her.

"And where to next week?" she asked.

This was very puzzling. Susie looked at Inigo and hesitated. "Well, if you want to know," said Inigo, in that special no-concern-of-yours voice we always employ with that opening phrase, "we're going to a place called Tewborough."

"Not far from here," said the woman.

"We're playing at the Theatre Royal there," said Susie, not without pride.

"Humph. Not much good'll come o' that," she said grimly, looking still more angular. "What is it you call yourselves? *Good Companions?* And you're sure Mr. Nunn's with you, are you?"

"Of course we are," replied Susie, rather indignantly. "We shall see him to-night or to-morrow morning. D'you know him? Can we give him a message?"

"James Nunn'll want no message from me. I saw him on that train, and if I'm not mistaken he saw me." She looked hard at them both, then gave herself a little shake. "I'm his wife," she said quietly, and began walking away.

Inigo stared. Susie gasped, then ran forward. "I say, though," she cried, stopping the woman, "how extraordinary! I've known Jimmy for ages and never knew——"

"He'd a wife. No, I'll be bound you didn't."

"But listen! I'm Susie Dean, and Jimmy used to know my father very well."

"And I knew him too," said this astonishing Mrs. Nunn quite calmly. "I might have known you were Charlie Dean's girl, for you've the look of him."

"But how wonderful!" cried Susie. She was almost dancing with excitement.

"Is it?"

"Of course it is."

"Why?" said Mrs. Nunn, without the least flicker of interest. "I don't call it wonderful. It takes more than that to surprise me. Good afternoon."

"But surely you're not going away just like that," said Susie. "I mean, not *saying* anything at all. You simply can't go like that."

Mrs. Nunn gave her a long level stare. "What is it you want to know?" she demanded.

"Well, it isn't exactly that I want to *know* anything," Susie explained, "but you see—meeting you like this——"

"Without any intention of being rude and while thanking you for answering any questions I might have asked," said Mrs. Nunn, in a very angular voice, "I must tell you that you're a good deal too excitable. You get out of the habit of working yourself up about nothing or it'll grow on you, Miss. And that's all there is to it. Good afternoon." And she marched off without another word.

"Well, of all the dried-up, bony, beastly women!" cried Susie, rejoining Inigo, who had hung back. "Did you hear her?"

"Jimmy saw her," Inigo announced. "He saw her on the platform when he was looking out of the window. Don't you remember how queer he went?"

"And no wonder!" said Susie. "But isn't it strange? I never knew he had a wife." And for several minutes she exclaimed at this discovery and then sketched in various accounts of Jimmy's past, in all of which no blame was attached to him.

"We've heard of the skeleton in the cupboard," said Inigo meditatively.

"And she's it," Susie put in quickly. "And now we won't talk any more about her. The point is, where are we going?" They were now out of the station and had wandered into what was presumably one of the main streets of the town.

"So this is Hicklefield," said Inigo, looking about him with distaste and shivering a little. "Methinks the air doth not smell wooingly here, my Sue. In fact the place gives me the hump, absolutely."

There was a light fog over the town. The shuttered shops and banks and warehouses were vague shapes and like the scenery of some dismal dream. Cars came sliding from nowhere, twisted this way and that, hooted like wounded monsters, then slipped away into nothingness. Ponderous trams loomed up, creaking and groaning, stopped to swallow a few morsels of humanity, and lumbered off to unimaginable places. A policeman, an antique taxicab, a man with newspapers, a woman in an imitation sealskin coat, and a few other persons and things, were

standing there, apparently waiting for Doomsday to break. Nothing broke the grey monotony but the pavement itself, which was startlingly black in its grime. There was no colour, no sparkle of life, anywhere.

"My God!" cried Inigo. "Let's get out of this, Susie. Another minute of this and I give up hope."

"We'll jump on that tram," she said, pointing, "and see what happens. Come on." They raced down the street and boarded the tram just as it was moving off, to the delight of the conductor, who plainly had not expected anything at all to happen that afternoon. The top of the tram was covered, and they climbed up there and sat in a curved little place in front.

"Now this is much better," said Susie, peeping out at a moving Hicklefield.

"Isn't it?" he replied. "Like being on a galleon."

But he was not looking at Hicklefield but at Susie herself, who seemed more vivid and radiant than ever, and as he looked at her he found himself possessed by a most curious feeling, a kind of ache, made up of wild happiness and sickly excitement. He realised at once that this place, the front of this tram in Hicklefield, was the only place in the world for him, and when he thought of other places, where there was no Susie, from the Savoy Grill to the sunlit beaches of Hawaii, they appeared to be nothing but desolations. He realised in a flash that it would be better even to be miserable with her than to be anywhere else, for so long as she was there the world would still be enchanted, whereas if she were not there it would be a mere dark huddle of things. He knew now he was in love with her, and would go on being in love with her for ever and ever. This was it, there could be no mistake. He had jumped out of the train simply because he could not bear being without her; he had jumped and had fallen, head over heels over head over heels, in love.

"Susie," he said, "I say, Susie." And then he stopped. His voice sounded ridiculous, like the bleating of a sheep.

"Well, Inigo?" Her dark eyes were fixed upon his for

a moment, then suddenly their expression changed. She was looking at the conductor, who was now standing at Inigo's elbow. They asked him where they could go, if there was any chance of getting tea at the journey's end, and he told them that about half a mile or so beyond the terminus there was a fine big hotel, standing on a main road and largely patronised by "motterists." It was, they gathered, a most sumptuous establishment, and Inigo decided at once that they must go there and have tea. As it was nearly an hour's ride to the terminus, they would neatly dispose of the time before the evening train.

After the conductor had gone, Inigo had no further opportunity of telling Susie what had happened. It was she who began talking now. He smoked his pipe, watched the delightful play of her features, and listened half dreamily to what she had to say. Now and again her voice was completely drowned by the groaning of the tram as it mounted a hill. It was all as odd and queerly moving as a dream: the mysterious stretches of Hicklefield darkening below them; the little place, so cosily their own, on the tram; Susie, with her eyes deepening into reverie, lost in remembrance; the tale of her past that progressed as they progressed, a dream within a dream: it was all so strange. He has never forgotten it.

"You're in for an awful time, Inigo," she began, smiling vaguely at him. "I'm going to tell you the story of my life. No, I'm not really, but I can't help thinking about everything in the past. It's all going jumbling away in my head. Meeting that woman, I suppose. I keep thinking about my father. Did you hear her mention him? He was on the stage, and so was mother. They were both in musical comedy. He was a baritone lead in touring companies, and she used to do soubrette parts, French maids as a rule. She was half French and she'd an awfully good accent. They used to play in those funny old jiggety-joggety things, *The Country Girl* and *The Geisha* and *The Circus Girl*. They were both playing in *Florodora* when they got married, in Manchester. I can remember a

dressing-case thing Dad always had with him and it was a wedding present and had something on it, you know: "With the Best Wishes of the Florodora Company, Manchester," and all the rest of it. It's silly but I just want to cry when I think of that. I don't know why, exactly, but I can sort of see them there in Manchester and their *Florodora* and "Tell me, Pretty Maiden" and everything —little little figures, all very excited and happy, and when I think of them, these little figures are all in a bright light, but they're ever so tiny and all round them is a huge blackness, and it's back there in nineteen hundred and two and not one of them knows what's going to happen. Do you see, Inigo? I'm sure you don't, and I simply can't begin to make you understand how I see it. But it's just —sort of—life, the real thing, and either you've got to laugh at it or cry a bit, when you see it like that, really you have. Now say I'm silly."

He shook his head, and the look he fastened upon her offered her everything he had. But she was not thinking about him. She was still groping among her memories. When she began again, it was in a very subdued voice, and he could only catch an occasional word here and there. It was something about her mother, who had died only a year or two after Susie was born. He gathered that she had been looked after then by an aunt for several years. Then he heard more, for the tram was quiet and she was raising her voice a little.

"That's the queerest part and the one I remember best," she was saying, "when father decided to take me round with him on tour. I was about five or six when that began, and it went on for several years. It's all such a funny muddle, though bits of it are frightfully clear. Going round dozens of towns, but they all seemed alike. Only sometimes the landladies called me 'poor little dearie' and sometimes 'puir wee lassie' and sometimes 'doy' and sometimes 'hinny'—I remember that awfully well. And often when there was a matinée, Dad would take me with him, and when he was on, I'd be held up in the wings and sit

in the dressing-rooms, sitting on comedians' knees or in chorus girls' laps, and I'd be given chocolates, and everything was always so queer and smelly—grease paint and powder and gas, you know—but I'd hear the band playing and people laughing and clapping, and I loved all that. It was horrible sometimes at night, though, when I had to go to bed before Dad went down to the theatre, and sometimes the landladies were horrible, with huge red faces and smelling of whisky. And the rooms too. I can see one now—it seemed enormous, with giant pieces of furniture and awful dark cupboards with Things in them waiting to spring out on you—and the blinds weren't down properly and the horrible greeny light of the lamp outside in the street shone in, and I'd shiver and shiver there every night, creeping down under the clothes and just waiting for something to come—bump! But then sometimes when father came back, I'd wake up and go downstairs and he would be having his supper and perhaps he'd give me some. He adored cow-heels, done in milk and with onions —and so do I. We had scores and scores of little jokes we used to repeat over and over again. Dad said that bringing out these jokes was the only way he had of furnishing the home. He didn't drink much, not then anyhow, but I always knew when he'd had one too many because he always came and cried over me, and said I must promise never to go near the stage, and always ended by giving me what he called elocution and ear-tests and telling me I had only to work hard to get to the top one day because it was born in me. But he was a darling, very handsome and with a jolly good voice, and all the landladies adored him and so did most of the women in the companies he was with; even I could see that. But then he decided it wasn't good for me any more, and I had to live with another aunt near Clapham Common and go to school—oh, hateful!"

By the time he had learned how she fought against the dull horrors of life near Clapham Common, how she returned to her father when she was fifteen, went into concert-party work with him when she was sixteen, saw

him taken to hospital, to die there, when she was seventeen, how she had struggled on her own ever since, they were at the terminus. The town had long been left behind. There was nothing to be seen but a tiny shelter and the road that wandered into the gathering darkness. But half a mile down that road, the conductor told them once again, was the grand hotel on the main road going north, the hotel patronised by "motterists." Off they went, at a brisk pace. "Hope you don't mind stepping out, Susie," said Inigo, "but the fact is, I'm finding it rather cold now without a coat."

"I'll run all the way if you like," said Susie. Then she put a hand on his sleeve. "Poor Inigo! I never thanked you properly, did I, for leaving the train just to keep me company?"

Inigo stopped and seized the hand that had just touched his sleeve. He was trembling a little. "Susie," he began, "I must tell you now. I've made a tremendous discovery. I—I—adore you."

"But, Inigo," she cried, "how nice! I thought you did, though. Do keep on, won't you?" She made a little movement that suggested she was ready now to walk on again.

He had hold of both her hands now. "Yes, but it's much more serious than that. It's not just friendliness. It's everything, every mortal blessed thing and for ever and ever."

Her hands slipped away. "You sound as if you were about to propose," she said lightly. "It's not as bad as that, is it?"

"Of course it is," he cried. "And I am proposing and anything else you like. I'm in love with you, absolutely, frantically. It's marvellous. It's terrible." The next minute he would have taken her in his arms but she was not there to take. And then they were walking briskly down the road again.

"I'm sorry," she said at last, and said it quite gravely.

"I don't quite see what you're sorry about."

"Well, you're rather a darling, aren't you?"

"I don't suppose I am," he replied rather gloomily. Then he brightened up, and said eagerly: "But if you think that now, it will probably be all right, won't it? I mean, I'm ready to give you a little time, though it's frightfully hard—or will be frightfully hard—just sort of aching about you."

"Don't be absurd, Inigo."

"I'm not. That's how I feel. All the time you were talking in that tram, I was just dying to kiss you. I am now. I don't know why I don't, except that—well, this is the kind of love——"

"Well, what kind is it? Do go on, Inigo."

"I won't go on," he said gruffly. "I'll tell you some other time. You're simply laughing at me."

"My dear, I'm not," she protested. "And to show you how serious I am, I'll tell you a secret. I've rehearsed this conversation heaps of times."

"What! With me?"

"No, not with you, stupid, with nobody in particular, just a rather vague but frightfully attractive young man who was in love with me. And he would say a lot of the things you've just said—though he usually went into detail far more—you know, said what it was about me that made him fall in love—and then I'd reply and say how sorry I was——"

"Just as you told me how sorry you were," Inigo put in, a trifle grimly.

"And then I'd tell him we'd always be the dearest friends but that I'd made up my mind I'd never never marry. I would tell him that I'm wedded—as they say in the books of words—to my Art. And then very very gently I would tell him to go away and fall in love with some one who could love him back, but usually he said he would do nothing of the kind, all other girls having lost their charm for him for ever. I liked that part," she confessed, "and usually left it at that."

"There's only one thing you've forgotten, Susie," said Inigo reproachfully. "I'm a real person, not a vague, but

attractive young man you've just imagined. Doesn't that make any difference? It ought to, you know."

"It does. Now I'm really glad, really excited."

"Well, there you are then," he cried triumphantly.

"And I'm really really sorry. That's the difference, but that's the only difference. And now let's talk about something else. Shall we?"

"There's nothing else in the world to talk about, absolutely," said Inigo gloomily.

"There is. There's the hotel to talk about, and I can see it. It looks like a big one, doesn't it, really 'motteristy'? Let's have an enormous tea. It must be my tea because this is all my fault."

So these two infants arrived at the hotel, which was evidently used as a halt by motorists going north and south on this main road. A number of cars were standing before the entrance. Big as it was, the place looked cosy and inviting.

Inigo looked at his watch in the lighted doorway. "We can just manage an hour here," he said, trying to sound as if the conversation along the road had never taken place.

"Then that's just right," said Susie, "and I think you're very clever to have planned it so nicely. But then you are clever, aren't you, Inigo? And I like you."

"I'm cold, hungry, and an ass," that young gentleman replied, and made a desperate attempt to smooth his hair before a waiter caught sight of him.

III

Tea would be served, they were told, in the lounge. There was a large bright fire in the lounge, and there was also a large bright woman. She stood out from the other guests, the assorted "motterists," like a cockatoo among thrushes. Indeed, she was not unlike a cockatoo. A tiny curved beak of a nose jutted out of her purply-red face; she had big staring eyes and a little round mouth, daubed a fearsome vermilion; her clothes were gaudy and expensive; every time she moved there was a glitter of

jewellery; and she seemed to have enough flashing odds and ends of handbags and little boxes to stock a small shop. She sat alone, not far from their table, and was easily the most conspicuous person or object in the room. Susie and Inigo, however, had a further reason for remarking her gorgeous presence, for from the moment they entered she stared at them. At first she gave them a puzzled stare, but that soon changed into a plain stare, which went on and on and did not appear to mean anything.

"Why does she do it?" Inigo whispered. "There isn't anything wrong with us, is there?"

"That's what I've been wondering," Susie replied softly. "I've been trying to go over myself and I seem all right. You looked a bit blue at first, but now you're thawing out nicely." She handed him his cup. "She must be wondering if she knows us."

"She doesn't know me—thank God!" he muttered.

"No, but she may have seen *me* somewhere," Susie went on with a flash of pride. "When you think of it, I've played to thousands and thousands of people all over the country, and I must see somebody who has seen me sometimes, mustn't I?" And then she became very gay, very sparkling, and was so prettily attentive to Inigo that he began to think she must be in love with him a little, after all.

"Unless," he told himself, as he gloomily devoured a piece of shortbread, "she is doing it out of kindness, just to make up for not caring about me." By this time he could no longer bother his head about the woman who stared. He did not even know if she was still there, for he had gradually moved round his chair until at last he had his back to her. When he had finished his shortbread, however, he noticed that Susie was looking up, with a rather puzzled expression on her face.

"What's the matter?" he inquired. "Is the starey bird going?"

"Now I know I'm intruding," said a voice just above his head.

Inigo jumped with surprise, and as he jumped he sent his fat armchair rolling back. It bumped heavily against something, and Inigo, turning round, discovered to his horror that the something was the flashing bosom of the staring woman. She gave the chair a push. He gave it a frantic tug. The result was that the chair shot forward and hurled Inigo against the tea-table. One of his hands knocked over the hot-water jug, and the other flattened itself against a plate.

"I'm sure I *must* be intruding," cried the staring woman.

"Not at all," said Susie, trying to smile sweetly at her and at the same time keep one eye on the hot water, which was now creeping about the table. "Won't you sit down?"

"Not at all! Rather! Absolutely!" roared Inigo, who did not know what he was saying. He waved a hand towards a chair—it was the hand that had just been flattened against the plate and there was a piece of bread-and-butter sticking to it. "Sit here—there—won't you?" he went on. He waved his hand again, and most of the bread-and-butter went on the chair.

"I ought to introduce myself, oughtn't I?" the woman was saying.

"Do be careful of the hot water," Susie cried to her.

"No, don't sit there," Inigo roared again. "It's all bread-and-butter."

Having said this, Inigo could say no more. He suddenly lost control of himself. The woman herself, with her staring eyes and little beak of a nose and her magnificent finery, her unexpected arrival, his jump and subsequent antics with chairs and bread-and-butter, the watery ruin of the tea-table—all these things made a combined assault upon him. The next moment, everything in the lounge, everything in the whole world, seemed wildly absurd. He flung himself down in his chair and gave a yell of laughter.

"I'm Lady Partlit," their visitor announced, sitting down.

This was quite enough for Inigo, who went off into another fit of laughter. It would have been the same if

she had been Mrs. Jones, if she had merely remarked that the weather was cold. He was helpless now. Whatever happened, whatever was said, would be screamingly funny.

Susie gave Lady Partlit their names, but she only just managed to get them out in time. Her eyes were very bright and she was biting her lips. The next minute she too had fallen helplessly into the giggles.

Lady Partlit smiled at them both a trifle vaguely. Her voice, however, was triumphant. "I thought I knew you," she said. "You're in a concert party called *The Good Companions,* aren't you? Of course you are. I saw you at Sandybay a few weeks ago."

"Yes, we were there," Inigo spluttered. He looked hard at the teapot in the hope that he would somehow be able to control himself, but it was hopeless. He pulled out his handkerchief, tried to wipe his eyes, and exploded again into silly laughter.

"I saw you three times," said Lady Partlit. "So good, I thought you were. Such a change!"

"I'm glad!" Susie faltered, trying not to look at Inigo. "It's nice to think——" But then she went off again. "Oh, do stop it, Inigo. You *are* a fool." With an effort, she got her face straight, turned to Lady Partlit and said apologetically: "You must think we're awfully rude, but it's just his silliness, and now—now—he's started me off." And she giggled again.

"Not in the least," said Lady Partlit, still smiling. "And—er—where are you people going to now, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Middleford," replied Susie, and brought out the name as if it were the greatest joke in the world.

"That's it. Ha-ha," roared Inigo. "Middleford. Ha-ha-ha-ha. Sorry, but I really have to laugh when I think of Middleford." And he buried his head in his hands and yelled with laughter. This torrent swept away any tiny reserve remaining with Susie, who promptly joined him. Lady Partlit looked from one to the other of them; her eyes opened wider and wider; her little round mouth

gradually widened; her rather heavy cheeks began quivering; then finally she burst into laughter too, a queer soprano sobbing that made the other two want to go on and on for ever. And there were the three of them, shaking, watery-eyed, helpless.

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!" cried Lady Partlit, dabbing at her eyes. "I don't know what it's all about, but I haven't laughed so much this long time. I like a good laugh too." Her speech was far homelier now than it had been before, and any suggestion of the great lady had completely vanished. They saw before them a kindly, rather silly, rich woman in her early forties, who waved away their apologies for their astonishing behaviour.

"I'm sure it's done me good," she told them. "I wasn't expecting to have such a good laugh in this place. My word! Now won't you let me order you some more tea? Are you sure? Well, what about some cocktails if the bar is open? Or some chocolates? Have a cigarette?" She produced a gold case, and the three of them lit cigarettes and settled down to talk.

"Don't forget our train, Inigo," said Susie. "You know how long it took us to get here, over an hour and a half."

"What's this?" asked Lady Partlit, and when they told her, said eagerly: "Now you mustn't think of going to the station that way. I've my car here, and Lawley will take you down there in no time, and all nice and comfortable, and you'll be able to stay here all the longer. And that'll be nicer for me too. I was going through to Yorkshire to-night, and just stopped here for tea, and then I thought I wouldn't go any further to-night because Lawley says there'll be fog farther up later on, and so I said I'd stay here and go to bed early after dinner with a nice book. Now what do you say to that? Let Lawley take you to the station."

Susie accepted at once, and though Inigo would rather have returned as they came because he could then have had Susie to himself, he could not offer any objection.

"You mustn't think it strange my coming up like this and talking to you," Lady Partlit continued, "because for one thing you must count me among your admirers. I've never seen such a good show at the seaside before, and I've told all sorts of people about you. Such an original name too! And then, another thing is, I'm almost in the business myself in a way of speaking. My late husband—he was Sir Joseph Partlit—you may have heard of him—was very interested in the theatre business himself just as a side line, you know, and he left me a controlling interest in two West End theatres and some productions."

Susie's eyes lit up at once and flashed a message to Inigo. "Here," they said, "is the Fairy Queen."

"What's the matter?" asked Lady Partlit.

"Nothing at all," said Susie, "except that you're the person we dream about every night. Two West End theatres! Productions! Not musical comedy or revue, by any chance?"

"As a rule, yes. I'm glad too, because I like them best, though I like a good romantic play too."

"I can hardly believe you're real," cried Susie, smiling at her.

"But you mustn't think I've really anything to do with this business," Lady Partlit explained amiably. "I'm just a little nobody in the background. All I do is sign things now and again, though I like to keep popping up and seeing what they're doing. Helps to keep me busy, you know, and a widow without children like me hasn't much to do. But don't run away with the idea that I've much say in it."

"You've enough say in it to take *my* breath away, Lady Partlit," said Susie sturdily. "Mr. Jollifant there—you can call him Inigo; he likes it—may not care, because he's only an amateur slightly disguised, but as for me——! And if Jerry Jerningham were here, I wouldn't be answerable for him. He'd probably want to kidnap you."

The effect of these last two remarks was astonishing. Lady Partlit's ruddy cheeks were now like two mounds of

pickled beetroot; her eyes were soft and bright; her bosom heaved and flashed.

"You remember him, don't you?" asked Susie, who had observed these significant symptoms. "Our light comedian and dancer."

"Oh yes, I do. I thought he was—wonderful," Lady Partlit faltered.

"He is," said Susie. "Isn't he, Inigo?"

"Absolutely. Jerningham himself may be a terrible——" But here he stopped because he received a kick on the shin from Susie.

"A terribly good dancer," that young lady prompted.

"Exactly!" cried Inigo. "I must say he's the best step dancer I've ever seen."

"And so marvellously good-looking of course," said Susie.

"Yes," said Lady Partlit faintly.

Susie gave a little laugh that struck Inigo as being the most unreal he had ever heard. "It's funny," she said, "the way Jerry attracts all the women in the audience. They'd run after him if they could, but they can't. He's never to be found."

"Is—is he married?" Lady Partlit brought out this question in a tiny stifled voice.

"Who on earth——" Inigo began, but was immediately kicked into silence again.

"Oh no, he's not married," replied Susie brightly. "He's not even thinking of it. He thinks about nothing but his work. He's very hard-working and frightfully ambitious—like me."

After this, the talk that followed seemed merely casual, but it had a trick of working round to Mr. Jerry Jerningham. Susie gave Lady Partlit a list of all their future dates she could remember. When at last the car came round for them, Lady Partlit slipped away and returned with a large box of chocolates for Susie and a box of cigarettes for Inigo, and was almost tearfully affectionate in her farewell,

though her regret at their departure did not compel her, they noticed, to accompany them to the station.

"Well," said Inigo, when they had seated themselves in the big limousine, "I must say I don't understand that old girl. I think she's a bit mad."

"Idiot! Don't you see," Susie hissed, "she's the person who sent Jerry that bouquet at Sandybay. She adores him."

"Gosh!" was Inigo's comment. But he listened patiently while Susie discussed various aspects of this strange affair. They sat there in comfort, while the limousine rolled through the murk of Hicklefield. When it came to a stop at the station, Susie sighed luxuriously. "People can say what they like," she said wistfully, "but it must be marvellous to have a lot of money."

And anybody who saw her getting out of that limousine must have thought she had a lot of money. Her sketch of a very rich and bored young creature, the spoilt darling of fortune, was only offered to an audience of two porters, a taxi driver, and a nondescript, but nevertheless it was superbly done. Her hatless and overcoatless companion, who came out shivering slightly, was left somewhere in the air; he was there, but not in the picture; and it was not until he opened the door of an empty third-class carriage for her that he returned to the picture and she was Susie Dean again.

IV

"Figure or no figure," said Susie, "I must have some." She was examining the box of chocolates that Lady Partlit had given her. They were very large aristocratic chocolates, and by the time they had eaten two or three, the last glimmer of Hicklefield had left their flying windows. Once again Susie pointed out that it would be marvellous to have a lot of money. She dwelt rather wistfully on the subject of riches.

England is pre-eminently the country in which it is difficult for two to agree: if one turns realist, the other turns idealist; a cynic instantly creates a sentimentalist.

Inigo stoutly denied that money, beyond a necessary competence, was important; he denounced the life of luxury, even going to the length of refusing a third chocolate; and he declared that Susie's attitude pained him. In a very short time, however, the lover overcame the philosopher in him.

"If that's what you think," he said, rather gloomily, "I'll make a lot of money. I don't want it, but I'll do it just for your sake. Didn't you say I could probably make something out of songs?"

"Heaps and heaps," she told him. "If the right people hear them, I'm sure your fortune's made, Inigo. I really mean that. You've got a gift that could easily be a gold-mine."

"Well, there you are then. I'll make a lot of money for you."

"But I don't want your money, you absurd creature. I want to be rich myself, all by myself."

"I don't believe you know what you want," he declared, seeing that it was obvious she did not want him.

"That only shows you don't know anything about me," she said. Then she thought a moment. "I want to be a star. I want to be Susie Dean—bang!—like that. Enter Susie Dean—bang! 'Here she is!' I want them to say. Not just for myself, either, but for my mother's sake and my father's sake—to make up for all their dreary journeys and digs and hard work and rotten pay and no chances. I know it won't make up for all that, yet I feel it will in a way if I go right to the top. Not that I don't want it myself, of course," she added.

"Of course," he said.

"I believe you're being sarcastic."

"No, I'm not. Go on."

"Well," she said, looking at him but not seeing him, "I don't care about having my photographs in papers and little paragraphs about me and my name up in electric lights—not that it wouldn't be rather nice, you know—but that's not what I think about. I'd like to have a nice little

flat—where managers rang me up and asked me to look at parts—and a dresser who adored me and perhaps a very cosy car, small but frightfully posh; and enough money to spare to give all sorts of people delightful surprises, holidays and presents; and now and then I'd like to run away from it all; go on a voyage perhaps under some other name, and not let anybody know who I was, and then somebody would come up and say, 'You do remind me of Susie Dean,' and then I might admit I *was* Susie Dean, and everybody on the boat would say, 'That's Susie Dean,' and they'd probably get up an entertainment specially so that I could appear in it, and—oh—all kinds of things." She ended breathlessly.

"It sounds a lonely sort of life to me," said Inigo cheerlessly.

"Oh, but I'd have heaps and heaps of friends," she cried. "I couldn't exist without 'em. You'd be one, wouldn't you, Inigo?"

"I suppose so." He saw himself somewhere dodging in the background, holding her cloak, while all manner of important and handsome males held her attention.

"You do sound miserable about it. I don't believe you want me to be successful. I believe you're one of those men who can only be friendly if they're allowed to patronise." She looked haughtily out of a window through which there was nothing to be seen. He tried to look out of the window on his side too, but found it impossible to avoid glancing at her. After a minute or two, however, he noticed she was peeping at him. He smiled, and instantly she jumped round and faced him.

"Aren't we absurd?" she smiled. "We're nearly as bad as Joe and Mrs. Joe. Last summer they bought a ticket for the Calcutta Sweep, and one day, just before the draw was announced, they began to talk about their chances. Then when they'd awarded themselves a favourite, they began to wonder what they would do with the money. Joe said he would buy an hotel at one of the big seaside places. Mrs. Joe said she would invest all the money and live on the

income from it. No hotel for her, she told him. He insisted on his hotel. They argued for hours and got crosser and crosser and crosser until it ended in a quarrel and they never spoke to one another for two days, the poor darlings. Now, come and sit on this side and then you won't have to stare at me and make me think I've done something dreadful to you."

Inigo rose and stood for a moment looking down on her and listening to the rhythmical rattle of the train. "It's melancholy, you know," he said slowly. "I ought to be happy here alone with you, Susie. I believe it's been my idea of happiness for some time."

"Why, Inigo?"

"I'm not going to tell you again. What I was going to say is that it's rather melancholy. But then there's always been something melancholy to me about Sunday night, something a bit heart-breaking, absolutely."

"I know," she replied softly. Then she looked fierce. "No, I don't," she said in a loud voice. "Sit down here, Master Jollifant, Master Inigo Absolutely, and if you don't cheer up, I'll shake you. Unless, of course," she added, peeping at him, "you're sad about me."

So they sat side-by-side and talked idly as the train went clanking through mysterious regions of night towards the still distant Middleford. As time went on, Susie said less and less, began to yawn, and drooped away from him, into her corner. She had just nodded off to sleep when a ticket collector came in and wakened her. Then she yawned and drooped again, and this time her head sank in his direction until finally it rested against his shoulder, where it remained, to his delight. There was perhaps a certain bitter flavour of irony in this delight, for she had made it plain that he had little to hope from her and this was only the surrender of sleep. But it had something trusting in it, and his hopes revived under the slight pressure of that head against his upper arm. The very cramp that soon invaded his limbs took on a romantic beauty.

Where it was the train stopped, shortly after ten, Inigo never knew. It seemed a fairly large station. Susie opened her eyes, sighed, then went to sleep again, leaving Inigo praying that nobody would disturb them. At the very last moment, however, when the whistle sounded, the door was flung open to admit some raw November night and a large man. Inigo looked at the man in despair. The man looked at Inigo with cheerful interest. He sat in the middle of the opposite seat, removed his hat, mopped his brow, re-lit the stump of a cigar, put a fat hairy hand on each knee, and blew little benevolent clouds of smoke at Inigo and the sleeping Susie. He was a well-developed specimen of a type of large man seen at all race meetings, boxing matches, football matches, in all sporting clubs and music-hall bars. His head was pear-shaped, beginning with an immense spread of jaw and ending at a narrow and retreating forehead, decorated by two little loops of hair, parted in the middle. His eyes protruded; his nose shone; his little moustache was ferociously waxed. There was a suggestion that innumerable double whiskies were hard at work illuminating his vast interior. All these details Inigo noted with distaste.

The man removed the stump of cigar and winked slowly, ponderously, at Inigo. "Just caught it," he said companionably. "In the bar of the *White Horse* at ten, and here I am. That's moving, y'know, that is."

Inigo merely nodded but that seemed quite enough to establish a firm friendship with this genial intruder.

"Here," he said, producing a flask as unexpectedly as a conjurer, "have a drink of this. Go on, there's plenty for all. No? Well, will your wife have one? No, she's not your wife, is she? She's your sweetheart. Our wives and sweethearts," he proclaimed, holding up the flask, "and may they never meet." He drank this toast with enthusiasm.

"Mind you," he said sternly, "that's just my fun, that about wives and sweethearts never meeting. If I say that to the missis, she just laughs. She knows me well enough to know that that's my fun. My wife *is* my sweetheart, and we've been married twelve years at that. Twelve years

and always the best of pals—the best," he added fiercely, as if Inigo had just contradicted him. "The very best," he went on, "the very very best. Here's to her." And he took another pull at the flask.

"Anything she wants," he observed, "she can have—in reason. There's reason in ev'rything, isn't there? All right then. She's only gotta ask, that's all. She knows it. Her mother knows it. 'You're lucky,' she says to my wife. 'You're lucky.' She wasn't lucky—that's my missis's mother I'm talking about now—and I say she wasn't lucky. She got nothing. The old man wouldn't part. But that's not me. Get on the right side of me, and there's nothing I've got you can't have. My missis knows that. She's on the right side of me. We're the best of pals, the very best. And the same with the wife's mother—just the same—the very best. Here's luck to the old lady." This toast apparently emptied the flask, which was now laid down on the seat, while its owner, after breathing hard, looked at Inigo, looked at the unconscious Susie, and slowly and sentimentally wagged his head.

At any other time, Inigo might have enjoyed this gentleman's society, but now he found it difficult even to tolerate him. Somehow that railway carriage was not the place it had been an hour before.

"Pretty!" said the stranger, still wagging his head at them. "Very pretty! As good as a picksher to me." He sighed hugely as he stared at Susie. The last draught from the flask appeared to have washed away any lingering reserve, and now he was very tender and mellow indeed. "I know what it is. I've done my courting, holding her up half the day and half the night, the same as you now. Happy times—you can't beat 'em. Look at her now, just dreamin' there, happy and trustin'. And a nice little girl you've got hold of too, young feller, I can see that. Look after her, and then you'll be one of the lucky ones, like me."

"It's been a rotten cold day," said Inigo desperately.

"What's a cold day to a warm heart?" cried the other reproachfully. "Don't tell me you've noticed it's a cold day. I'll bet your little sweetheart there doesn't know it's a cold day. Ah, I wish I was your age, young feller. Put your arm round her properly. Cuddle up to her. Don't mind me. I've been young. I'm young yet. I know what makes the world go round. It isn't money. It's love. It's two hearts beating as one, as the song says." He leaned back, tried to fix a goggling stare on Inigo, and sang softly, beating time with one hand: "My swee-eet-heart when a boy-yer—in days of long ago-er."

Inigo closed his eyes and pretended to go to sleep. It was all he could do. The wretched song went droning on for some time then gradually died away, to be succeeded finally by a snore. Inigo moved his cramped limbs cautiously, and let his thoughts go jog-jogging with the train through the night.

"Mid-ford! Mid-ford!"

Immediately the stranger opened his eyes, sprang up, grabbed flask, hat, bag, and vanished.

"Are we there?" cried Susie. "I must have been asleep. Who was that?"

"That," said Inigo with deliberation, "was our fellow passenger, a large and rather tight gentleman with a mind like a cheap Christmas card. And most of the way he's been calling you my little sweetheart."

"Poor Inigo, how disgusting!" she said coolly. "Do look out and see if you can see Jimmy or anybody there."

He crept out, very stiff and feeling rather cold. "I can see Jimmy farther up the platform," he announced at the door. Then he stood there looking up at her. Their day was all over now. "Well, that's that," he said, a trifle mournfully. "Come along, Susie."

She looked at him curiously. "Help me down," she said. "I'm rather stiff." Then when she had got down and her hand still rested in his, she cried softly: "Cheer up. And thank you for looking after me, Inigo. There!" And it came and went so swiftly, that kiss, that he hardly knew if it had really existed.

"Susie!" he cried.

"There's Jimmy." And she hurried away, waving a hand.

We catch a last glimpse of him following her down the platform.

CHAPTER IV

THE BLACK WEEK

I

CATHEDRAL cities, market towns, ports forgotten by the sea, spas long out of fashion, all these can decay beautifully, and often their charm increases as the life ebbs out of them. Industrial towns, like steam engines, are only even tolerable if they are in working order and puffing away. Tewborough was like an engine with a burst boiler lying on the side of a road; it was a money-making machine that had almost stopped working, for only a wheel here and there shakily revolved or a pulley gave a groan or two; it was a factory that could now show you nothing but broken windows and litter and mouldering ledgers and a mumbling caretaker; it was nothing but an old cash-box containing only dust and cobwebs and a few forgotten pence. Trade in Tewborough had nearly disappeared altogether, and it was quite obvious that it would never come back again, would always prefer other and pleasanter places. It was a town of dwindling incomes, terrifying overdrafts, of shopkeepers who lived by stretching one another's credit, of workingmen who were rapidly becoming nothing but waiting men, their chief occupation being to hang about the doors of buildings that were known—with a fine irony—as Labour Exchanges. Tewborough had always been one of the ugliest towns in the Midlands, and now it was easily the most depressed and depressing. Its wealth had long ceased to accumulate but its men still decayed. The days when Tewborough's coal and lace-curtains and tin-tacks were in brisk demand everywhere, when many a local man who still liked his tea in a pint pot could "buy up" the county's Lord Lieutenant and was known to have shaken

Gladstone himself by the hand, these days had gone and had left nothing behind them but a few public buildings in a bad Gothic style, two bewhiskered and blackened statues, some slag heaps, disused factories and sidings, a rotting canal, a large slum area, a generous supply of dirt, rickets, bow legs, and bad teeth—and the Theatre Royal.

When Mr. Oakroyd brought out his verdict on the place, he and Miss Trant had not spent a whole day there, but their roseate visions had long faded and vanished. It was impossible to like the town, though they had both tried hard and had perhaps succeeded in concealing a little of their dislike for it from one another. Miss Trant told herself she had never imagined that any town could be so hideous and depressing: she wanted to run away at once and never even think of it again. Sitting in the dingy coffee-room of the hotel, with a plate of congealing mutton fat in front of her, she had felt she was ready to cry at any moment. She knew already that Tewborough could not be amused by their show or any other show. When the man at the hotel had heard she had taken the Theatre Royal, he had stared at her and then given a short and disconcerting laugh. "Having a pop at it, are you?" he had said. "Well, I suppose there's nothing like trying. You're not the first, and I dare say you won't be the last, even yet. I thought old Droke was looking pleased with himself, last time I saw him. Met him yet? He's a queer old stick, if you like, as rum as they make 'em round here—and rummer. Well, well, well!" And Miss Trant did not like the sound of this at all.

Early on Monday morning she made the acquaintance of Mr. Droke, and though she did not spend much time in his company, it left her in no doubt that Mr. Droke certainly was as rum as they made them. He was a very little old man, with an immense head and quite tiny legs and feet, so that he looked like a dirty and dingy gnome. His senile voice came whistling through his browny-white moustache and beard, and he had a horrible trick of coming quite close and punctuating his jerky statements with vig-

orous upward nudges of his elbow. "It's a good theatre," he would say. "Isn't better round here, go where you like." Nudge. "Been some famous actors there, they tell me. I don't know 'cos I wasn't here then, I wasn't." Nudge. "Had a shop in Liverpool then. Sold it and came back here. Got a shop here now." Another nudge. Miss Trant in retreat and Mr. Droke in close pursuit, ready for the next nudge. "Belonged to my brother, this theatre did, and he left it to me. I don't bother with it much, too busy, and don't care about theatres. They used to be always wanting me to be doing this and doing that to it, but I couldn't be bothered, d'you see, and having my shop too and trade being so bad. Nothing wrong with it, though, nothing at all." Nudge. "A good theatre still. All fads, that's all. Nothing wrong with it. You're not faddy, are you?" More nudges. "Well then, it'll suit you all right. Very cheap at the price, very cheap. Too many faddy people now, aren't there? Don't know what they want."

Miss Trant was not sure that she knew what she wanted but as soon as she saw the outside of the building, she knew at once that she certainly did not want the Tewborough Theatre Royal. Her heart sank. Its position was bad, for it was down a dark side-street; and its appearance was worse. Missing panes of glass, unpainted and rotting woodwork, dirt and litter, everywhere. The only things that were bright and new there were their own playbills, and they looked pathetic, so young and hopeful, so utterly out of place. The inside was worse than the outside. It was smaller than most old-fashioned theatres, but it was built on the usual plan, with stalls, pit, dress circle, and separate gallery. The seats in the gallery were narrow wooden benches, and those in the pit were similar benches with backs to them, and both pit and gallery stank abominably. The stalls and dress circle had the usual plush chairs, but they were all old and worn and stained. At one time the place may have made a pretty show of gilt, but now the dust and grime were so thick on the gilding that it returned no answering gleam to the lights. On the ceiling and the proscenium

were some cracked nymphs and peeling cupids. Such carpets as there were on the corridors were threadbare. Old playbills lined the greasy walls: *Are You a Mason?; The Girl from Kay's;* the Tewborough and District Amateur Operatic Company in *Dorothy; The Face at the Window;* Dr. Faustein in his *Great Mesmeric, Thought-Reading and Mystical Oriental Entertainment;* and here and there were yellowing photographs of heroic actors in togas or bag wigs, bewhiskered old "heavies," and simpering leading ladies of the 'Nineties, all of them catching her eye as she passed and whispering: "We're dead and gone." She peered through a dirty glass door labelled *Sal on Br* and saw a counter and a few bottles all thick with dust.

"That's shut up now," said Mr. Finnegan. "We 'ad the licence taken away. 'Ard on a management, very 'ard!" This Mr. Finnegan, to whom she had been handed over by Mr. Droke, was called the manager, but he was obviously a general factotum in receipt of a mere pittance. He was old, shabby, and gently steeped in liquor, and such a pitiful figure that at any other time Miss Trant would have felt sorry for him, but now, as he shuffled down these grimy corridors with her, she could only regard him with distaste. When they returned to the auditorium, its atmosphere seemed more unpleasant and oppressive than ever: it was like walking into a drawer full of old rubbish that had not been turned out for twenty years. Miss Trant shuddered.

"Oh, but it—it's awful!" she cried. "All so dirty and depressing."

"Well," Mr. Finnegan mumbled, "I don't say it wouldn't do with a clean-up, but—bless yer—it's a prince to some. You're new to it, aren't yer? Thought so; tell it in a minute. Wants tidying a bit, I dare say, but wouldn't be worth it just now. And theatres is all alike when you come in during the day and they're all empty, all alike they are: put you off if you don't know 'em. I've seen this place packed to the roof—everybody here—mayor and corporation, everybody! When Wilson Barrett opened 'ere with his *Sign o' the Cross,* there was over a nundred pounds in the

youse, over a nundred pounds, Monday night, and that was when a quid *was* a quid, when you could buy something with it. Can't do that now, course. There isn't the money in the town." He shook his head mournfully.

The faded crimson curtain began shaking too. It gave a creak, then finally parted and rose. Two figures in shirt sleeves walked on to the stage, and Miss Trant, approaching, discovered that one of them was Mr. Oakroyd. When she drew near, she saw that he was very gloomy and disgusted.

"Eh, Miss Trant," he cried, "it is a mucky noil at t'back here. You nivver saw such a muddle. We'll have some trade on getting this right, we shall an' all. Come and have a look at it."

Miss Trant went round, looked at the stage, peeped in a dressing-room or two, sent for Mr. Finnegan (who could not be found), telephoned to Mr. Droke (who did not reply), and went in search of two charwomen to assist Mr. Oakroyd and his shirt-sleeved colleague, who had a glassy stare and a perpetually open mouth.

"He's not all there, isn't Charlie," whispered Mr. Oakroyd. "That's his name—Charlie. He's a bit soft but he'll ha' to do. If he were right, he wouldn't be working here. If this is a the-ater, give me them pavilions and kursaals ivvery time. This is nowt but a rag-bag. It'll cap me, Miss Trant, if we do much here. Town's got a bit of a miserable look about it."

"It has," replied Miss Trant emphatically. "And I never saw a miserabler."

"No more did I," said Mr. Oakroyd. "We've nobbut been here a two-three hours, you might say, and it might improve a bit on acquaintance, but so far it's a right poor do."

Mr. Oakroyd, as we know, was not difficult to please. No man can live in Bruddersford for over forty years and be hypercritical; your Bruddersfordian is never one of those sensitive creatures who are entirely at the mercy of their surroundings. But already Tewborough had been too much even for Mr. Oakroyd. Before meeting the others at the station, he returned to his lodgings, thus making further acquaintance with the town and disliking it more. His terse comment to Inigo summed up his view of the whole situation, the theatre, the town, the lodgings, everything. After making that comment, he walked away, partly because he had to see to the baggage but also because he had a good sense of the dramatic. After a few minutes he returned to Inigo's side.

"You and me has to share rooms," he announced.

"Oh, how's that?" Inigo asked. "Is the town full?"

"Nay, there's nowt on here at all. But they won't let. We'd a right job getting lodgings and they've all got to share. It's allus alike. Less brass fowk's makking, less they want to mak'. If you go to a place where they're as throng as they can be, they're allus ready to mak' a bit more. You come to a place like this here, where all town's on t'dole and they're all pining, and you can't get 'em to let you have a room or two and sell you a bite and a sup o' summat. Fowk's so badly off, they won't be bothered."

"Reluctant as I am, Master Oakroyd, to break in upon this deep philosophical strain," said Inigo, "I must put a question. What are the digs like?"

"Well, you'll see for yersen in a minute," replied Mr. Oakroyd. "There's plenty o' room, I will say that. We've getten a big bedroom, with a gurt double bed in and one o' these little uns, camp beds. It's number nine, Billing Street, and it's right handy for t'the-ater. But by gow!—I don't know whether I'm not feeling up to t'mark or what—but there's summat about this place that seems to tak' t'heart right out o' me. I hope you don't mind being in wi' me, lad," he added shyly.

"Of course I don't," said Inigo, who didn't.

"'Cos I'll be right glad of a bit o' company i' yond place," he concluded.

There was certainly something very cheerless about Billing Street. It was narrow and dark, and had far more than its share of listless ailing women and children with

grey faces and reddened eyes. It had two or three little warehouses with broken windows; a greengrocer's that seemed to have nothing but potatoes and paper bananas for sale; a chip-and-fish shop that smelt of tallow; a tiny grocer's that apparently specialised in black lead and sardines; a furtive little newsagent's, full of announcements about special wires and tips from the course; an undertaker's, with a specimen brass plate and a blackening wreath in the window; a herbalist's establishment, adorned with a large placard that said *Your Stomach Wants Watching,* a number of mysterious green packets, and a highly coloured drawing that had some reference to skin diseases; a second-hand shop filled with bamboo tables, flat-irons, and rolls of oilcloth; and two of the dingiest and dreariest looking little public houses that Mr. Oakroyd, a man of experience, ever remembered encountering. Just behind the street was a building with a fantastic tower, a sinister conglomeration of pipes and ladders and tanks, and this, it appeared, was a sulphuric-acid works. Nobody seemed to know whether it was still making acid or not, but if its pipes and vats were idle, their smell was not, for it descended into the street in sudden and sickening gusts.

Number 9 was the largest house in the street, and it looked the gloomiest. You could only imagine it existing in a perpetual series of dark Novembers. No sooner had Inigo set foot in it than he thanked God that he was not there alone. No wonder Mr. Oakroyd had talked about "a bit o' company." The bedroom was quite large enough for two of them and it seemed reasonably clean, but there was something strangely chill and depressing about it.

Inigo sniffed. "What is this queer smell? I've met it before. Wait a minute. I know. It's just like the smell of old magazines. When I was a kid, I used to dig out ancient copies of the *English Illustrated Magazine* from the lumber-room, and they had a smell just like this. Odd, very odd!" He looked about him. "Not very jovial, is it? I feel as if there were a body in the next room."

"There is," replied Mr. Oakroyd grimly.

"What!" Inigo jumped.

"Well, it's as good as one," Mr. Oakroyd went on. "T'landlady's owd mother's i' there, ower eighty and bed-ridden. You'll hear her coughing. I only hope she'll last t'week out. They've all gotten summat wrong with 'em here. It's war ner an infirmary. Mrs. Mord—that's t'land-lady—her you've just seen—she's not ower-strong——"

"A bit blue about the face, certainly," said Inigo gloomily. "I don't know that I want to hear any more."

"You might as well nar we've started. Her husband's been off his work a long time—he wor a clurk in one o' them warehouses—and I don't know fairly what's he's got, but I've nivver seen a feller so swelled up, all purple he is and puffed up, it taks him five minutes to do owt for his-sen and he can hardly talk. Eh, he's in a bad way. You'll be seeing him soon."

"I won't."

"And you haven't to excite him—that's what t'landlady says—he hasn't to be excited——"

"I don't want to excite him. I don't want to set eyes on him. I'm sorry for him, very sorry for him—he sounds like a human fungus—Hello!—what's that?"

"That's only t'owd lady coughing."

Inigo breathed hard and looked thoughtfully at the things he was unpacking.

"Ay, they're a rum lot here," Mr. Oakroyd continued. "There's a sort o' young woman. I haven't had a proper look at her, and Mrs. Mord says nowt about her, and I don't know who she is."

"For the love of Mike," cried Inigo, "don't tell me there's something wrong with her too! It'll finish me, absolutely."

"Well, all I knaw is she doesn't seem to do owt and there's summat funny about her. When you're going up and down t'steps or along t'passage, you suddenly see her face peeping out from nowhere and then she lets out a sort o' laugh and next minute you hear her scampering away as

if somebody wor after her. I've seen her three times nar and I'm getting a bit used to it——"

Inigo had stopped unpacking. He was now sitting down and staring at his companion. "She sounds as mad as a hatter," he said despairingly.

"Ay, I fancy she must be a bit soft. They seem to run to it here. There's a feller at the-ater called Charlie and he's not quite all there. No harm in him, y'r know; just hasn't got twenty shilling to t'pound."

Inigo stood up. "I'm going," he announced.

"Nay, lad, stick it, stick it! It's best we can get. And I only got in here 'cos I said they'd be two of us."

"There must be an hotel. I shall go to an hotel. You can come too."

"Nay, I'm going to no hotel. I've takken these lodgings and I'm staying here. They've gone to a lot o' bother to get it right for us. It's all nowt. Stick it, nar you're here."

"All right," Inigo replied gloomily. "I shall spend most of my time at the theatre. That's the only thing to do. No wonder you said it was bloody awful. The adjective was justified, absolutely."

"Eh, I wasn't talking about this place," said Mr. Oakroyd.

Inigo looked at him with horror. "What were you talking about then?"

"Well, t'general carry on. Town itself, to begin wi', and t'the-ater."

"Theatre?" Inigo's voice almost rose to a scream. "Don't tell me there's anything wrong with that!"

But Mr. Oakroyd insisted upon telling him what was wrong with the theatre, and they were halfway through tea before he had done. "This Tewborough do's a washaht," he concluded, "and you can mak' up your mind about that. We shall do nowt here."

"This is where we look sick," Inigo groaned. "I told you about last night, didn't I? And everybody's half dead to-day. All the way we've been saying that only a good week here will pull us together. Tewborough or death has been our motto, absolutely. Lord help us!"

It certainly looked, Mr. Oakroyd admitted, as he took out his pipe and packet of *Old Salt,* as if they were in for it.

II

"Talk about a frost!" cried Mrs. Joe, immediately after the performance on Monday night.

"You could skate on it for weeks," said Susie gloomily. "And I'll swear I've a temperature of 102."

"And I'm sure you look it, my dear," Mrs. Joe told her. Then she went on, passionately: "Was there an audience at all to-night? Was there *anybody* in the house? I thought I heard a sound once from somewhere, but was I mistaken? Does Tewborough know we're here?" she asked wildly.

"It knows but it doesn't care," said Susie.

"I said to Joe last night: 'Mark my words, Joe, this is going to be a bad week. I feel it in my bones,' I said. To-morrow, I shall spend most of the day in bed—and what a bed, my dear!—I'm sure it's one of those beds that rise in the middle, like a camel. And the room has no outlook and no cosiness. Not over-clean and the walls all covered with photographs of Oddfellows. But I shall spend most of to-morrow in it, nursing myself, and then I shall come down again to-morrow night, but if I'm no better the next day I shall *not* be here, I shall go sick. The last thing that can be said of me is that I disappoint my public, but what I have to ask myself now, my dear, is this: Have I got a public in Tewborough?—and—Is it worth it?" Mrs. Joe produced these questions with an air of triumph.

"No, it isn't worth it," said Elsie crossly, "and I wish you'd shut up. What's the good of talking?"

"Jimmy looked really bad to-night, I thought," Susie said reflectively.

"I expect we all looked bad." Elsie sniffed hard. "I know I feel rotten enough, and feeling rotten isn't a hobby of mine like it is of Jimmy's. Me for some aspirin to-

night. Come on, Susie, you *are* slow. Let's get out of this thing they call a theatre. Theatre Royal—my God! Theatre Dustbin—if you ask me. Oh, ca-ar-m on!"

On Tuesday night there were exactly fifty-three people in the audience. It was miserable when they kept silent, and it was worse when they applauded, for then you seemed to hear the empty spaces mocking the thin faint clap-clap-clap. Not that they applauded often. All the heart had gone out of *The Good Companions.* They trailed through the performance, and the only time they showed any signs of liveliness was when their growing irritation got the upper hand. Elsie complained bitterly of Jerry Jerningham; Susie openly accused Inigo of murdering her accompaniments; and even the good-humoured Joe began grumbling. Several of them declared it was high time Mr. Oakroyd had learned his business, and were instantly told by that indignant little man to go and mind their own, which was, he asserted, "in poor fettle." Jimmy Nunn was strangely listless, and it was queer and disconcerting to see him so quiet, so yellow and shaky. Miss Trant, who felt very apologetic about her disastrous venture, though it was she and not the others who would suffer most from the certain dead loss on the week, tried to smooth out these prickly relations and to cheer everybody up, but the heart had gone out of her too. The dismal town and the miserable waif of a theatre kept her spirits for ever sinking, for to leave one was only to encounter the other.

Wednesday brought a fog, not one of the choking yellow London horrors, but still a good thick blanketing fog, which settled on the town early in the morning and stayed there all day. *The Good Companions* sat huddled in their several rooms, trying to make the most of tiny fires and horsehair armchairs or sofas, reading papers that seemed to describe another planet, under greeny-white tattered gas-mantles, dozing and shivering and occasionally getting up to peer out of the streaming windows at the grey woolly nothingness outside. Of all of them, perhaps Inigo was the most cheerful, simply because the aspiring author in

him now rose to the occasion. That author, who worked more fitfully than ever in these days, had not yet finished *The Last Knapsack,* having set it aside on the plea that wintry weather brought about an unpropitious atmosphere, but nevertheless he now made his appearance again.

"Off with the motley and on with the inkstand—that's what I say," Inigo told Mr. Oakroyd, in their common sitting-room. "I was in the middle of a song, but I can't think about songs now. The mood, the mood—Master Oakroyd—is dead against any pierrotry. I was intended to be a man of letters and not a mountebank, and to-day I begin an essay—very bitter—that I shall call *England's Pleasant Land.* It will deal with the town of Tewborough, with a few other such resorts thrown in, and will be devilish ironical, bitter, absolutely. It will relieve my feelings, and it'll also make some of 'em sit up."

"That's the idear," said Mr. Oakroyd, puffing comfortably at his pipe and beaming across the hearth at his companion. "If you can't do it wi' Tewborough, you'll nivver do it with owt. But who's these that's going to be made to sit up?"

"Well—er—the—er—people responsible for such a state of things," replied Inigo, vaguely but severely.

"I nivver knaw who they are," Mr. Oakroyd confessed. "Other fowk allus knaws, though. It's allus either capitalists or t'workingmen, or it's this Parlyment or t'last, or it's landowners and employers or it's Bolshies. I can nivver mak' nowt out on it mysen, can't tell whose fault it is, but then I'm not one o' t'clever sort. It's allus all a right muddle to me. But you'll mak' summat owt on it, I dare say. And while you're at it, just slip in a nasty piece about yon' Droke who owns t'the-ater. Put us i' t'cart and right, he has. I call him a mucky mean old man, who owt to be going round wi' a little rag-and-bone barrer, he owt. But get thysen going, lad. Get it aht o' thy system."

Inigo nodded gravely, lit a pipe, then without hesitation and with a fine flourish wrote at top of his first sheet: *England's Pleasant Land: by I. Jollifant.* Nor did he stop

there. He actually began the essay itself. "It is eleven o'clock," he wrote. Having stared at this for a minute or two, he crossed it out and put in its place: "I have just looked through the window, which is gemmed with moisture." This did not please him, so out it came, and he began a new sheet, at which he frowned for nearly ten minutes. Then he wrote: "Outside, this morning, the spoil of many clanking years——"; crossed out "clanking"; crossed everything out; then drew six faces and absent-mindedly decorated them with curly moustaches; then sighed, filled and lit his pipe again, and leaned back in his chair.

From the hall outside came the sound of a very slow dragging footstep. Mr. Oakroyd looked up from his newspaper. "That'll be Mr. Mord," he announced, "and he's coming in here—if he can nobbut manage it." Mr. Oakroyd said this with a certain relish, as if he rather liked breaking bad news.

Inigo groaned. We have already heard Mr. Oakroyd describe their landlady's husband, and since then Inigo has had two encounters with the purple and swollen invalid. "I'm sorry for him, my heart bleeds, absolutely," Inigo muttered quickly, "but I can't stand having him about. It's like watching a ghastly slow-motion film. Have I time to get out?"

He had not time to get out. There was a vague knock at the door. Then the door opened slowly, very slowly, a maddening inch or two at a time, and finally admitted the stricken Mr. Mord, who looked purpler and puffier than ever. He stood just inside the room for at least a minute, and then, having partly recovered from the journey, he produced, with all the care of a man saying something for the first time in a foreign language, the words: "Good morning, gen-el-men." Then he nodded, very slowly. Then he smiled, and his smile was so leisurely that there was time to remark the appearance and disappearance of every crease in his dark swollen face. Then he made a step forward, then another step forward, then another. He saw a chair, seemed to examine it very thoroughly, and finally

moved towards it. "I'll take—a seat—if—it's all—the same—to you—gen-el-men," he said; and when he spoke it seemed as if every syllable was an achievement. Then he lowered himself into the chair, carefully placed a puffy hand on each knee, turned his head round slowly to look first at one and then at the other, and ended by attempting speech once more. "Seems—to me—a foggy—morning," was his verdict. "Used—to get—lot o' fog—here—one time."

"Rather, yes! Awful lot of fog! Nasty thing, fog! Never liked it myself." Inigo found himself jerking out these idiotic phrases at what seemed an incredible speed. "Must excuse me now, Mr. Mord. Awfully busy. Have to rush off." And off he rushed, at least until he found himself outside the room, when he stopped and wondered where to go and what to do. The bedroom was miserably cold and cheerless, and he would have to sit in his overcoat there and probably have to listen to the old woman coughing in the next bedroom. If he wandered about the house, at any moment he might meet that mysterious and terrifying female who peeped round corners, gave a sudden screech, and then went scampering away. On the other hand, he could not possibly stay in the sitting-room and watch Mr. Mord's horrible slow-motion performance. He went to the front door and looked outside. It was chill and ghostly. He crept upstairs to his bedroom, snuggled under his overcoat on the bed, and read a stained old copy of *Tom Bourke of Ours*.

It was chill and ghostly too in the theatre that night. They played and danced and sang like people in a miserable dream. Nobody was completely laid up yet, but nobody was any better. There were more grumblings and complaints, and it looked as if there would soon be downright feuds between the various bickering and snarling members of the troupe.

On Thursday the fog turned into black rain. This was the day on which most of the shops closed in Tewborough and the surrounding districts, and there were hopes of

a better audience for that night. Mr. Oakroyd, who had been round to the theatre for half-an-hour, returned in the middle of the afternoon to smoke a pipe with Inigo by the fire, and told him there were a few scattered bookings.

"Shop fowk here's got a bit more to spend than t'other fowk, so happen we'll ha' summat like a nordience to-night," he remarked. "But if it isn't one thing, it'll be t'other."

"And what do you mean by that, my sage Brudders-fordian?" asked Inigo lazily.

"Bother wi' t'troupe," replied Mr. Oakroyd with great promptness. "Bound to be a bit of bust-up soon, mark my word. All at it. And some on 'em'll get rough edge o' *my* tongue afore so long an' all, way they're going on. And there's owd Jimmy there, looking fit to drop, right poorly. And another thing. When I were going on, I saw yon Morton Mitcham coming out of a pub and I could see he'd had a few. Well, just afore I leaves the-ater in he comes wi' that chap, Finnegan—both on 'em a bit goggly—and they've getten a bottle o' whisky wi' 'em, a full un. They'll be at it nar, pair on 'em. Just you keep yer eye on yon Mitcham to-night. If he isn't three sheets i' t'wind by to-night, call me a liar, lad."

Inigo could not keep an eye on Mr. Mitcham before the performance began because Mr. Mitcham was nowhere to be seen. When the curtain went up, he was still missing. There were more people in the theatre that night than there had been on all the other three nights put together; the place was about half full, a good many people having come in from neighbouring small towns and villages, and it had a livelier air; with the result that the players themselves felt more cheerful. The only exception was Jimmy Nunn, who was more listless and shaky than ever. At the end of the third item, a song by Joe, and while the audience was still clapping, Mr. Mitcham made his entrance. His make-up was very sketchy and he appeared to have a rather glassy stare. He was fairly steady but nevertheless contrived to knock a chair over before he sat down himself.

For quite ten minutes, during which his assistance was not required, he sat, a huge huddled figure, staring at his banjo. At the end of that time, when Jimmy Nunn was about to announce the next item, Mr. Mitcham suddenly sat up and began playing. Jimmy, who had no idea what was wrong, stared at him, but there was no help for it. So Mr. Mitcham went on playing, very loudly and at top speed, and the rest of them had to pretend that it was part of the programme. Ten minutes, quarter of an hour, twenty minutes passed, and still Mr. Mitcham went twanging away, until at last the audience, half-admiring and half bored, burst into applause. Then he stopped, staggered forward, bowed, and suddenly roared out: "La'ies Shenelmen!—one thing wanner say—one thing—thas all—jus' one." And then, taking a deep breath, he bellowed: "Four times roun' the worl'"; and bowed again. At this the audience applauded again, while the other performers, now stiff with horror, tried to look as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening.

Smiling idiotically, Mr. Mitcham now held up a long shaky hand, and said: "Prosheeding ennertainmen'—permission, la'ies an' shenelmen—few fea's leshermain. Will any la'y—any shenelman—*Any* la'y—*Any* shenelman—any-any-anybody—" he stopped for a moment—"take-a-card?" And he held out his banjo.

Inigo, catching an agonised glance from Jimmy, immediately started playing as loud as he could, and Joe was able to hustle Mr. Mitcham off the stage in such a way that the incident appeared to be a well-rehearsed gag. Once in the wings, Joe took care that it should not be repeated, hurrying the protesting Mitcham down to the dressing-room, while the others went on with the performance.

Miss Trant always confessed that she went in terror of drunken men, but there was no sign of it that night. She was so angry that she insisted upon seeing Mr. Mitcham as soon as she could. Even when he rose or wobbled to his feet, towered above her, and brought out again that large idiotic smile, she found she was not at all frightened but

only wanted to shake some sense and decency into the great silly old disgusting baby.

"Goo' eening, Miss Tran'," he said genially. "Goo' housh to-ni' and I gorrem goin', didden I now?"

"Please go home at once, Mr. Mitcham," she cried. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

He looked pained, and for a moment or two regarded her in silence with reproachful goggly eyes. "Mish Tran', these not wordsh of a frien'," and he wagged his head mournfully. "No, no, no. Who gorrem goin'? Didden I? Four time roun' the worl'—four times, mindjew—*Four*—an' still gerring 'em goin'—Morton Mitcham."

She turned away in disgust and looked appealingly at Joe, who had not returned to the stage. "Come on, ol' man," said Joe. "Just you get yourself going."

Mr. Mitcham seemed to regard this as a brilliant though bitter repartee. "Clever, clever," he said, shaking his head, "bur nor wordsh of a frien'. Bur if I'm nor wanned, I'll—go." And he suddenly went reeling away. Joe took charge of him, telling Miss Trant that he would be back at the theatre before the second half of the show began. For a moment now, Miss Trant felt inclined to go too, to turn her back on the wretched theatre and let herself cool down in her room at the hotel. She made up her mind that Mitcham should leave the troupe as soon as possible. She was still furious. To behave like that, just when things were so bad for her, was downright disloyalty, and the thought of it angered and then saddened her.

This was not the worst the evening had to offer, however, for in the middle of the second half of the show, Jimmy Nunn suddenly collapsed. He had sung one of his two songs—or at least had struggled through it somehow—and had made his first bow and then retired to the wings to make some slight change in his costume; Inigo was already playing the opening bars of the second song; when Jimmy, instead of changing, stared vacantly for a minute, gave a curious little moan, and would have fallen full length if Mr. Oakroyd, who was standing by, had not

caught him in time. Under his comic make-up (as a postman) his face was deathly pale; his lips were blue; and there were horrible little convulsive movements in all his limbs. Mr. Oakroyd knew that poor Jimmy always carried a small flask of brandy about with him, and this was discovered in the dressing-room. Miss Trant, trembling, managed to force some of the brandy between the blue lips, while Mr. Oakroyd supported the head and shoulders. There was some confusion on the stage, but all the time Inigo was still playing the same idiotic *pom-pom poppa-pom, pom-pom poppa-pom* for that second song which now might never be sung again. The audience was growing restive; there was some stamping of feet at the back.

Jimmy stirred; some colour returned to his cheeks; and he opened his eyes. He was able to sip a little more brandy.

"We must get a doctor," said Miss Trant.

Jimmy shook his head. "No. No doctor," he muttered. "All right in a minute. Carry on show."

It was Mr. Jerry Jerningham, of all people, who took command of the situation now. He darted into the wings, exchanged a word with Miss Trant, then, pale but fairly composed, returned to the stage, stopped Inigo, and said: "Ladies and Gentlemen, Ai regret to announce thet Mr. Jaymy Nenn will nat—ar—be able to continue his pawt of the—er—programme—awing to—ar—sudden indisposition." Here he stopped for a moment, and there was a noise somewhere in the auditorium. It seemed as if somebody was trying to get out in a hurry. "The next item—ar—will be a bahlad by Miss Stella Cavendish." At which the audience clapped, as audiences always do; Mrs. Joe walked over to the piano, looking very dignified but in such a flutter that she spilled half her music; Mr. Jerningham, that intrepid exquisite, gravely took a seat; and the performance continued.

They got Jimmy to his dressing-room and he was still muttering that he did not want to see a doctor when there came the sound of voices from the corridor outside. "Well, I don't knaw, missis," Miss Trant heard Mr. Oakroyd say-

ing. The next moment, a thin middle-aged woman in black had stalked into the dressing-room and, ignoring Miss Trant and Joe, was bending over Jimmy, who was staring at her with his mouth wide open.

"And how are you now, James?" she said, still examining him closely.

Recovering now from his first shock of surprise, he gave the ghost of a grin. "Not so bad, Carrie. What—you doing here?"

"You look badly, James. I thought you did earlier on. It won't do, James. You're a sick man. You're not fit to be sitting here, with that silly paint on your face. You want looking after."

Miss Trant, who had been too astonished to speak at first and then had not known what to say, now made a slight movement.

"I dare say you're wondering what I'm doing here," said the determined woman, looking at Miss Trant with an unfriendly eye. "Well, I'm Mrs. Nunn. And as soon as they gave out he wasn't well, I came round to see him. And it's lucky I happened to be here. I knew you were coming here because two of your troupe I saw the other Sunday at Hicklefield Station told me you were coming. You saw me out of the window that day, James," she added grimly.

"Yes, I did," said Jimmy, and left it at that.

"Yes, yes, of course, I see," said Miss Trant hastily. She felt very embarrassed. "We've been trying to persuade Mr. Nunn to see a doctor. I know he hasn't been well all the week."

"And never likely to be," cried Mrs. Nunn scornfully. "Nothing proper to eat, wet clothes, and dirty lodgings, I know! He ought to be in bed now. Tewborough Theatre Royal! Well, he's going to hear what I've got to say now. He's heard it before but this time perhaps he'll believe me."

This left Miss Trant no alternative but to go and leave this strangely united pair alone. Joe had already stolen out, so now Miss Trant followed his example. About quarter

of an hour later, in the wings, she found herself confronted by Mrs. Nunn again, and it was quite obvious that that determined woman had decided what was to be done. The very look of her reminded Miss Trant of a coiled steel spring.

"James Nunn is coming with me," she announced at once. "He's in a poor way and I'm going to look after him. You must manage as best you can without him——"

"Well, but naturally, I don't want him to go on playing here when he's so ill," Miss Trant protested. This extraordinary woman seemed to imagine they were ready to drag poor Jimmy on to the stage if necessary. "But where—I'm sorry, but I don't quite understand—where is he going?"

"With me," replied Mrs. Nunn promptly and firmly. "I live about twelve miles away, between here and Hicklefield. I've got a shop. That's why I came to-day, half-day closing. James Nunn's gone his way and I've gone mine, but we're husband and wife, nothing alters that, and I'm not going to stand by and do nothing when he's in such a state. I told him where it would land him before he'd done but he wouldn't have it. Now he's beginning to learn." She looked as if she were about to turn away, but brought out another remark as if it were a postscript. "Your troupe's not got enough go in it, not half enough go; you want to keep them up to the mark better, Miss." And, with that, she stalked away.

Miss Trant, gasping a little, stared after her, and wondered what she ought to do. Finally, she stayed where she was for another ten minutes or so, then went down to Jimmy's dressing-room again. Jimmy would want to see her before he went, and after all she had a right to know what was going to happen to him. But the dressing-room was empty. It was incredible that they could have gone like that, without another word, but there it was; they could not be found. Jimmy's astonishing wife had spirited him away, just as if she were a witch. "I shall believe in a minute she *was* a witch," she told herself miserably, as she drifted back down the dingy smelly corridor. Her head

ached and she felt ready to cry at any moment. Oh, this wretched, wretched Tewborough! She stayed to see the end of the performance, which had dwindled into a mere dismal sketch of their usual show, and to tell the others what had happened. Too tired and dispirited to join in their wild surmising and speculating, she crawled to her hotel, lay awake and listened to the black rain still falling on Tewborough, and felt alone in an ugly and incomprehensible world.

The next morning, as she sat scribbling letters over the coffee-room fire, a visitor was announced. It was Mr. Morton Mitcham. He looked ancient and bilious; longer than ever but more ruinous; and he seemed to come creaking into the room, an unmelodious jangle of bones. He came forward, one hand clutching his sad sombrero and the other nervously fingering the immense buttons of his overcoat, the Silver King. Miss Trant remembered this name for his overcoat—she had forgotten all about it, and it returned unbidden—and then she told herself that she could not possibly send him away. And in any case, with Jimmy absent, it would not be wise, she reflected.

"Miss Trant," Mr. Mitcham began very solemnly, in his deep harsh drawl, "I am here to make what apology I can—for last night. I understand that I nearly let down the show—at a difficult time, too—and I believe I also offended you personally." His eyes stared hollowly at her above his sunken and yellow cheeks. "I'm sorry. I'm very sorry indeed. I throw myself upon your mercy, believe me."

"All right, Mr. Mitcham," she said hastily. "I'm sure it won't happen again——"

"It will *not* happen again."

"Very well, then"—and she felt like this gigantic creature's schoolmistress; it was absurd—"we won't say anything more about it."

"Miss Trant, this is generous of you. It's—it's wonderful." Then, rather surprisingly, he stopped, lowered his massive eyebrows, and looked at her with something like disapproval. "But it won't do," he went on, with an air

of mournful reproach. "Something *must* be said about it. I ought to be ashamed of myself and I *am* ashamed of myself; but I doubt if I'm sufficiently ashamed of myself. Tell me here and now, Miss Trant, how disappointed and disgusted you are. For me, Morton Mitcham, the oldest and most experienced member of the party, the man who ought to see you through, the one trouper you ought to be able to depend on,—to behave like that! Gah!—it makes me sick to think of it. And Jimmy ill too! The show right up against it! And what am I doing? Rub it in, Miss Trant, rub it in. Ask me how I'd like you to tell people that Morton Mitcham let you down. You can't say too much or put it too strong," he went on, just as if she really had said all these things. "I deserve it, every word of it."

She could not help smiling. "If you insist, of course, I will say that I think you behaved very badly—or at least very stupidly, and that I was really angry about it last night. In fact, I had made up my mind——"

He held up a hand. "Pardon me for interrupting," he said earnestly, "but there's just one thing I've got to tell you. It couldn't have happened anywhere but in this place. Tewborough, Miss Trant, has been my what's-its-name—my Waterloo. Yes, it's downed me. I don't know whether I'm getting too old for the road or what—but here, in Tewborough this week, I've touched rock bottom."

"So have I," said Miss Trant, not without bitterness.

"I'm an old traveller, a bit of a vagabond, if you like," he went on, with a certain mournful gusto, "but I'm an artist too. The temperament's there, all the time, a lion waiting to pounce. I must have *something*—a bit of adventure, a bit of good cheer, a hand from the audience, a new show going well, anything will do, I don't ask for a lot. But in Tewborough—so far as I'm concerned—there's been *nothing*. The place, the people, the rooms, the theatre, the show frozen out every night—believe me, Miss Trant, I'm an old trouper, four times round the world, but I've nerves and all this has just got on 'em. I'll put it to you frankly—I'd just got to light the place up somehow, and

yesterday I overdid the illuminations. And that's how it is."

"I understand," she assured him. And she did. She could almost find it in her heart to envy him his toping. "It's all been a mistake, I know," she said wearily, "and I think we're all having a bad time and suffering from nerves. It's not like the same concert party. But you must help me out now, especially since poor Jimmy's been rushed off somewhere—I don't know where—by his wife. We're in an awful muddle now."

"Miss Trant," he said very impressively, "you have here a man who's going to see you through, whatever happens. Whatever you're doing, making up a new programme, anything, you can count on Morton Mitcham. I'll give half the show, if you like; it won't be the first time I've done it. Only say the word, whatever it is, and I'm there."

"Thank you," she cried, still amused but also rather touched.

"Thank *you.*" And then he added gravely: "I should like to shake hands on that, Miss Trant, if you don't mind."

So they shook hands, and then Mr. Mitcham immediately became his cheerful and reminiscent self again and insisted upon telling her all about various places he had visited that were not unlike Tewborough, though it was hard for anybody but Mr. Mitcham to see any resemblance. Then he departed, after assuring her again that she had in him, Morton Mitcham, the man who would see her through, the man who was prepared, if necessary, to keep the show going by himself.

And that very night he was compelled to keep his promise in part, for a dreadful thing happened. Jimmy was absent; but then they had expected that. But Jerry Jerningham was missing too. At first they imagined he was merely late, and after waiting a few minutes they began without him, a sadly depleted troupe playing to a sadly depleted audience. No message had been received from him at the theatre, and finally Miss Trant sent Mr. Oakroyd round to his rooms to see what had happened. Meanwhile, the others carried on as best they could. The absence of both Jimmy and Jerningham made a terrible hole in the programme. Susie and Mr. Mitcham, however, contrived to fill up and supply some comic relief, gagging desperately. When Mr. Oakroyd returned, he had a story to tell that only heightened the mystery. "Woman at his lodgings doesn't knaw where he is," said Mr. Oakroyd. "He said nowt to her. But a car come this morning, she says, and he went off in it. He didn't tak' onny luggage—she took notice o' that, you can bet yer life, 'cos she'd want paying afore she'd let him tak' owt away—and he didn't let on where he was off to or say owt at all to her. But it wouldn't cap me," he concluded, "if he hadn't ta'en his hook bart luggage, just gi'n us the go-by."

"I don't know what that means," said Miss Trant rather peevishly, "so I can't say whether I agree with you or not."

Mr. Oakroyd shot a curious glance at her. This was not like Miss Trant. "I mean," he said shortly, "he's gone off, luggage or no luggage. I can't say it plainer ner that." It must be confessed that all their tempers were a trifle frayed by this time.

Miss Trant walked away without another word. It did not matter where Jerningham had gone, the fact remained that he was not where he ought to have been, that he had let them down. She was hurt, angry. When the interval came, she found that Elsie and Susie were no longer on speaking terms and that Mrs. Joe had a complaint to make about the conduct of Mr. Morton Mitcham, who seemed to imagine, Mrs. Joe observed, that the programme belonged to him. Miss Trant refused to listen to any of them. "Don't be babyish," she snapped, to their astonishment, and turned her back on them. She had had as much as she could possibly stand, she told herself; the whole week a grim fiasco, money thrown away; Jimmy ill, missing; Jerningham missing; the rest of them getting drunk or wrangling, not making the slightest attempt to help her out; no loyalty, no comradeship; the whole thing in ruins. She

felt she was sick of it all. Here she was, stuck in this awful place, trudging through black streets, her time spent in either a dingy hotel or a dirty broken-down theatre, and this misery was costing her more than the most expensive holiday she could devise for herself. She could not hang about and watch the performance trailing to an end; she wanted to go to bed, to read something distant, gay, and adventurous, to forget Tewborough and its horrible Theatre Royal and *The Good Companions*—the very name made her wince; but first, there was something to be done.

That was why, when the show was over, Mr. Oakroyd said to them all: "Miss Trant's gone home, but you've to look at notice-board by t'door." On the notice-board was a sheet of paper that summoned them all, in the name of E. Trant, to attend a meeting on the stage the following day, Saturday, at noon: *Urgent.*

III

At noon on Saturday they were all there, not excluding Mr. Oakroyd, whose pipe was still in his mouth but quite cold and empty and whose little cap was as far back on his head as it could possibly go, two facts that proved beyond doubt that he was uneasy in mind. They were all uneasy, subdued; and when they spoke their voices were quieter than usual. It was a morning as cold and grey as slate. Every few seconds one of them either coughed or yawned, and they all looked tired. Inigo, glancing every now and then at Susie, wondered if she too was ill, for all her sparkle was gone and she was pale and heavy-eyed. Nothing had been heard of either Jimmy or Jerry Jerningham, and they all had the air of being survivors after a shipwreck.

"I think you'll agree," Miss Trant began, with a curious return to her earlier half-nervous, half-detached manner and clipped speech, "that we've got to decide what's to be done. To begin with—about to-night. Is it worth while giving a performance at all?"

"No, it isn't," said Elsie. "Last night was ghastly. They'll be throwing things to-night."

"Preposterous!" This was from Mr. Morton Mitcham, who drew himself up to his full height and menaced Elsie with his eyebrows. "Why shouldn't we give a show? There are six of us, aren't there? I call it turning good money away not to give a show. Why, one of us—just one of us—is too good for Tewborough, let alone six of us. I've known the time when a whole drama and vaudeville show thrown in were done with less than six. I myself—allow me to say——"

"Oh yes, we know!" Elsie put in rudely. "Out there in Timbuctoo, way back in Eighty-three, you worked miracles. We know all about that."

"You know nothing," said Mr. Mitcham with great scorn. "You haven't had a chance to learn. You've been nowhere. You've seen nothing. Ignorance, that's your trouble, young lady, sheer ignorance."

"Oh, you go and——" Elsie exploded.

"Now that won't do, my dear," Mrs. Joe cried hastily. "Do not let us forget ourselves, please. We're having our Trials and Troubles I know—or if I don't, then who does, my word!—but don't let's descend to Name-calling and—and—Baydinarge and Rudenesses." And Mrs. Joe sat up erect, looked very dignified indeed for about two seconds, but then unfortunately was compelled to sneeze.

"Well, I say—give to-night a miss," said Elsie sullenly.

"And I say you're rotten mean," Susie blazed out, "to think of it. Here's Miss Trant dropped an awful lot on the week and you don't even want to give her a chance to get something back. After all, it's Saturday and there's sure to be some sort of a house to-night. What's the sense of turning the money away, as Mr. Mitcham says. We can give them a jolly sight better show even now than they can appreciate, if I know Tewborough."

"Half a minute, though, Susie," said Joe in his slow honest fashion. "It's Miss Trant who's asking us if it's

worth it, so I don't see you can fairly blame Elsie for saying it isn't. It seems to me it's for Miss Trant herself to decide. I'm sure we'll all do our best, but if she thinks this is going to give us a bad name, and it might, then she'd better call it off."

"What do you think?" asked Miss Trant, turning to Inigo, to whom she felt closer, in this present mood, than she did to any of the others, for, like her, he was a newcomer to this world.

Inigo shrugged his shoulders. "It's all the same to me. If it was a matter of leaving this graveyard of a town, I'd say, let's go at once, for I believe it's simply this place that's done us in, absolutely. But if we've got to stay here, we might as well give the show to-night. It's practice for us; it might brighten somebody's evening here; and though I'll bet all the money we take to-night won't go very far, it'll help you, Miss Trant, to bring down the loss a bit. On the other hand, if you say, Let's pack up and go, on to the next place, over the hills and far away, I'm your man, absolutely."

There was a murmur of assent, but Miss Trant sprang to her feet, walked a yard or two, then faced them all. "But now I come to the next thing," she cried. "Are we going to other places? Is it worth while going on at all? That's what I'm asking myself."

She stopped and there was a little chorus of exclamations, through which the voice of Mrs. Joe could be heard repeating, in tragic tones: "I knew it. I knew it."

"Please don't misunderstand me," Miss Trant went on. "It's not money I'm thinking about, though I've lost a good deal, as you must realise, especially this week. And you mustn't imagine for a moment I'm rich, because I'm not. It was only because some money came unexpectedly that I was able to do this at all. But it isn't that, though naturally it's rather dreadful continually losing money. It's something else——" She hesitated.

"May I say something, Miss Trant?" said Elsie, rather sulkily. "If it's this week that's bowled you over, I hope

you'll remember that you brought us here, that it was your idea taking this stinking brute of a theatre."

"You *are* the limit," cried Susie, looking as if she was ready to silence her for ever. "Won't you be quiet!"

"Why should I be?" demanded Elsie.

"Grrr!" There was exasperation, indignation, disgust, and we know not what beside in this fierce noise that Susie made. But now she turned to Miss Trant: "You're not really going to chuck it, are you, Miss Trant? I know we've done badly so far, but really we haven't had a chance yet."

"Not a dog's," said Joe gloomily.

"I realise that just as well as you do," Miss Trant told them. "It's not that at all. It's—it's—what has happened this week that makes me feel I've had enough of it. Oh, I know this place has been awful and I brought you here. I never ought to have rented this dreadful, abominable theatre—I know that—I made a mistake, and I'm paying dearly for it. But you might have stood by me——"

"Stood by you, Miss Trant!" cried Mrs. Joe, throwing up her hands and glancing round with a look of deep despair. "Never was any manager of mine so stood by as you've been by me this week. If it had been Drury Lane I couldn't have done more, and wouldn't have done so much. Night after night, I've come here rising from a Sick-bed. 'No,' I said to Joe, when he begged me to stay in and look after myself, 'my Duty's there. If it was anybody but Miss Trant, I wouldn't do it,' I told him. Weren't those my very words, Joe?"

"That's right," said Joe, staring very hard at nothing in particular.

"I've no doubt whatever you did your best, Mrs. Brundit," Miss Trant went on, a trifle wearily. "But I can't get away from the feeling that the party as a whole has let me down this week. This was my special venture—I admit it's turned out to be a very silly one—and you ought to have backed me up. Instead of that, the party has gone to pieces——"

"You can't blame us because Jimmy had a heart attack

or whatever it was," Elsie interrupted. "And as for some people——" She stopped and looked significantly at Mr. Mitcham, who for his part tried not very successfully to pretend she wasn't there.

"Yes, yes, that was our bad luck," cried Miss Trant impatiently. "That couldn't be helped, but other things could—quarrelling, not bothering about the show, not trying to make the best of it, leaving the rest of us in the lurch—oh, you must know what I mean! If you don't, it doesn't matter; I'm only trying to explain myself. I feel the whole thing's gone to pieces."

"I'll never, never forgive Jerry Jerningham as long as I live for going off like that," Susie exclaimed.

"That boy's yellow," said Mr. Mitcham, and he said it in such a way as to hint that he had known this all along and was rather surprised that the others had not noticed it too.

"I suppose he *has* gone," Susie said doubtfully.

"Yes, he must have gone," Miss Trant replied, with a kind of weary contempt in her voice. "He's left his things behind, but probably he preferred to go without them rather than stay here. You called again this morning, didn't you?" she asked Mr. Oakroyd, who was dismally sucking his empty pipe in the background.

"Ay, I went and left t'message to say we was having a bit of a meeting here, if he came back. T'landlady said she'd heard nowt, and I fancy by t'look on her she'd just been takking stock o' his booits and shirts and collars to see how much they'd fetch in case she heard no more on him."

"We've seen the last of that bright boy," said Elsie. "He'd a lot to say about Mildenhall, when he went and did the dirty on us, but he's no better himself, as he'll hear from me if ever I set eyes on him again."

"Well there you are," Miss Trant told them. "The first real test—and—look what's happened. Can you blame me if I feel we can't go on. It's not been easy for me to do what I have done—I don't mean about money, but simply

that I knew nothing about the Stage and didn't understand this life—I had to take what seemed to me an awful sort of plunge. And what attracted me, I think, more than anything at first was the way you were all so loyal and kept so cheerful and friendly under the most horrible conditions. And now—well—I'm afraid I don't see it like that any more."

After her voice had trailed away into silence, nobody spoke, nobody stirred, for what seemed quite a long time. It was so quiet that they could hear, coming from the forgotten world into that strange shrouded place, the sound of the factory buzzers in the town.

Then Susie stood up. "No, I suppose I can't blame you, Miss Trant," she said tonelessly. "But—oh, I'm sorry. You don't know how sorry I am." There were tears in her voice now, and she swung round and walked to the side of the stage, where Mr. Oakroyd was standing.

"Nay, lass," he said, "tak' it easy, tak' it easy." Then he rubbed his chin hard, tried to push his cap further back still, finally pushed it off his head altogether, picked it up and jammed it on again, then stepped forward and manfully spoke up. "Nar then," he began, "I don't suppose onny on yer want to hear what I've got to say, but as nobody seems to be saying owt just nar, happen you'll listen a minute. And I say, Stick it. Don't give up, Miss Trant. Have another do at it. Nar don't get into your head I'm saying this 'cos I don't want to lose mi job—I don't want to lose it, I'll tell you straight, specially nar as I knaw t'ropes—but it isn't that. I fair hate thought o' a thing coming to nowt afore it's got started. Nivver let it be said that this here Tewborough took all t'heart out on us. Tewborough be damned, I say. We can show it."

"That's the stuff, Master Oakroyd," cried Inigo enthusiastically. "I'm with you there, absolutely."

"It's nobbut a matter o' turning a corner," said Mr. Oakroyd earnestly addressing himself to Miss Trant. "It's allus same wi' iverything. Stick it, get round t'corner, and you're there. Gi' this up nar and it's all flummoxed, might

as well nivver ha' started. Nobbut go on a bit, and you nivver knaw, happen in a fortnit or fower week you're coining brass and they can't mak' enough on you. Nay," he cried reproachfully, "we're on t'road, aren't we? Ther's downs as well as ups. This here's a down all right. What of it? We'll get on t'road agen, chance it, and—mark my words—if we're not up, right at top o't'tree, a'most afore you can say Jack Robi'son, nay, I'll eat this cap." And Mr. Oakroyd, carried away by his own eloquence, plucked off his cap, held it out, jammed it on his head once more, and turned away.

"Darling!" cried Susie tearfully as he passed her.

He replied by giving her a wink, not a jolly impudent wink but a stammering embarrassed wink, which announced that he knew quite well that he had been making a fool of himself. It would take a man years to live down such an emotional outburst in Bruddersford.

There was hardly time for the others to say anything before the voice of Mr. Oakroyd, this time raised in expostulation, was heard again, coming from that part of the theatre to which he had retired. Everybody looked up and waited expectantly. Something was about to happen, their attitudes said, and they were glad of it.

A large, glittering, jangling woman charged into the centre of the group on the stage, and looked about her wildly.

"Lady Partlit!" cried Susie and Inigo together, at once recognising their acquaintance of the hotel outside Hicklefield.

"Yes, yes. How d'you do? Of course!" Lady Partlit babbled, trying to see every one at once, so that she seemed to be spinning like a top. "I'm sorry to come like this. Must be intruding. But they told me—here. *Is* he here? Oh, where is he?" And she beat her little fat hands together.

Miss Trant was staring, amazed. "I don't understand," she began blankly. "Who—what—is it——?"

Susie darted forward. "Is it," she gasped, "Jerry Jerningham?"

Lady Partlit was at once so excited, anxious, confused, that she looked exactly like an agitated parrot. "Yes, of course, Mr. Jerningham. It's been all *all* a mistake, I assure you, and of course I can explain everything to him when I see him. Are you sure, are you really sure, he's not here? Because," she concluded wildly, "he's gone."

They assured her that Mr. Jerningham was not there, and would have asked her all manner of questions—for they were all bursting with curiosity—but she did not give them time. "Miss Trant, are you?" she went on, rushing across to jangle in front of that astonished woman. "So disturbing for you, of course, and so nice of you not to mind about my coming like this." Then she rushed back to Susie, whom she apparently regarded as the one member of the party likely to be sympathetic. "A complete misunderstanding from beginning to end, I do assure you, Miss Bean, Miss Dean, and all meant in the friendliest way. But he simply went off, went off without a single word, and I was sure I should find him here. And of course you're all thinking it's so strange of me, coming and behaving like this, intruding too, but I had to come if there was *any* chance at all of explaining to him, you see. And of course it's worse than ever, with no one here knowing anything about him."

"He's been missing for two days," said Susie.

"Yes, I know that. *That* I can explain," Lady Partlit began, when a sound made her look across and she gave a little scream. "There you are," she gasped.

And there Mr. Jerningham was, looking anything but his usual exquisite self. He jumped and turned crimson at the sight of Lady Partlit, who now hurried across the stage towards him.

"Go away," he screamed, backing a step or two.

"But it's *all* been a mistake——"

"Ai don't waarnt to hear anything," he shrieked. Then, with mounting fury, he added: "Thet man took away mai

trousers. He deliberately took them away. You told him to."

"Only to brush them," Lady Partlit wailed.

"Nat to brush at all," Mr. Jerningham cried, wagging a finger at her. "He just took them away. Then he laughed at me. Look, look, what Ai had to put on." And everybody looked at once and discovered with joy that Mr. Jerningham was wearing a pair of very dirty khaki trousers of a kind that might possibly be used by an undergardener faced with a morning's rough work. When Mr. Jerningham saw all their eyes fixed upon his awful trousers, he was angrier than ever with poor Lady Partlit, and told her to go away at once and that he never never wanted to set eyes on her again. Distressed and still babbling, she was led away by Susie, who accompanied her to the stage door.

"Very sweet of you, my dear, I'm sure," said Lady Partlit, brokenly, tearfully. "I felt so unhappy about it, and you will say as little as you can, won't you? I've an old friend lives near here, not twenty miles away, and I came specially to see—to see you all. That was on Thursday, and then I sent a note, just a friendly note, to Mr. Jerningham, and sent the car round for him, to bring him out. I thought—he's so clever, isn't he?—and I thought I might be able to help him, though I didn't tell him that, my dear, didn't tell him how I might be able to—you know—assist him in his career, because I thought—well, we ought to be friendly first, because you can help a *friend,* can't you? And then of course I never knew my friend would be called away like that, and never dreamt for a moment there would be that difficulty with the car on Friday afternoon, and I do assure you, my dear, that it was all a mistake and a misunderstanding about the—the trousers. He's so *bitter* about them, isn't he? I'm sure he'll never forgive me, but perhaps some time soon, you'll perhaps just—er—say something to him, will you? But of course don't *talk* about it, will you? I know I can rely on you not to do that. And if there's anything, anything, I can do for you, at any time, my dear—you're so clever too, aren't you? And it's been so nice of me—I mean, of you—that is, so nice seeing you again, hasn't it? Do I—Oh, here—yes, of course. Dear, dear, I must stop one minute before I go out—so upsetting rushing in like this, and then—everything such a mistake—hasn't it? Good-bye."

Susie stood looking after her a moment, drew a deep breath, then returned to the stage, humming a little tune that seemed to amuse her. Mr. Jerningham was still apologising and protesting to a bewildered Miss Trant, but he gave no sign of being willing to gratify everybody's curiosity. Susie took him aside as soon as she could. "Do you know who that was?" she inquired, not without malice.

"Mai dear Susie," he protested, "down't talk about that harrible woman. She's a fet middle-aged vemp, thet's what she is."

"You know she's Lady Partlit and very rich, don't you?" Susie went on.

"As a metter of fect, Ai do," he replied loftily, "and Ai don't care."

"But what you don't know, my dear Jerry," she continued softly, "is that she practically controls two West End theatres, mostly running musical comedies and revues."

"Mai God!" Mr. Jerningham turned pale and looked at her with horror. "And to think——!" The thought was too much for him, but as he looked away it chanced that he caught sight of the trousers he was wearing. "Ai don't care," he said stoutly, "she shouldn't have told the man to take mai trousers." Nevertheless, he was thoughtful for some time, and it was many weeks before he completely lost a certain brooding air.

"Of course, this does make *some* difference," Miss Trant was saying, when they returned to her side. She let the others chatter a little while she reconsidered their position. She did not understand yet exactly what had happened to Jerningham, but it was quite clear that he had not deliberately absented himself. He had vehemently insisted on the fact that it was no fault of his he had missed

last night's show, and was genuinely indignant at the suggestion that he had failed them.

"Nar then," cried the voice of Mr. Oakroyd triumphantly, "what about this?" Somebody was with him.

"Well, boys and girls!"

"Jimmy!" cried Susie, rushing at him. The next moment they were all round him, nearly shaking his hand off.

"There's a doctor in Mirley—that's where I've been—who's a marvel, a wonder, a miracle," Jimmy announced solemnly. He still looked rather pale and shaky, but he was obviously much better. "He's only young and he's got a bit of a squint and his teeth stick out—but, let me tell you, he could raise the dead, that chap. I went to see him, and he talked and tapped, and tapped and talked, until I got fed up. 'All right, doc.,' I says, 'don't mind me. Give me six months and get ready to sign in the space provided for that purpose on the form.' He laughed. 'Nonsense,' he says, 'I can make a new man of you. When did you see a doctor last?' So I told him. Four years ago. 'Thought so,' he says. 'And what have you been doing to yourself since?' So I told him. Trying this and that. 'Thought so,' he says again. 'Now you listen to me.' And he gives me some medicine to take and tells me what to do with myself. Then it was my turn, and by this time the wife wasn't in the room. 'Have I to stop here and do no work?' I asked him. 'Because if so, I shall be dead anyhow. If you tell me right out,' I told him, 'to get back to the boards, where I belong, you'll complete the cure. And don't just tell me,' I says, 'but tell my wife as well.' So he told me to see him again and then he'd let me know. I tipped him the wink all right. He knew what was what. 'Do him no harm to get back to work,' he said this morning. 'May do him good.' Collapse of the opposition! So here I am, Miss Trant, boys and girls, and so long as I take one dose before meals and one after, I'm fit and ready to crack the old wheezes."

"We were only talking just now, Jimmy," said Joe, "about whether we could give a show at all to-night."

"Give a show to-night!" cried Jimmy. "I should think we do give a show to-night, if I've to give it all by myself. To-night, one hundred and twenty-five members of the Mirley and District Co-operative Society—prevented, owing to un-fore-seen cir-cum-stances, from having their monthly whist-drive and dance—are coming to Tewborough, and for what?—to see *The Good Companions* at the Theatre Royal, where they will occupy the dress circle on special terms given 'em by Mr. Nunn. Now let's get busy and see if we can't pack the house."

"Let joy and what's-its-name be unconfined," roared Inigo, doing a little step-dance. "Now what do you say, Miss Trant?" he asked, lowering his voice. "Do *The Good Companions* go on?"

"They do," she replied, smiling and flushing a little.

"We'll learn 'em yet," said Mr. Oakroyd, perspiring with enthusiasm. "We will an' all. Tewborough 'ull noan do us down. Tewborough's nowt. It's getten a right slap in the eye this morning."

They played well that night, and a circle packed with members of the Mirley and District Co-operative Society was not slow to appreciate their efforts. (Even the Treasurer, a deacon at the Baptist Chapel who had misgivings about any form of entertainment that ventured further than a cantata, was heard to laugh several times.) "I don't say it's been a riot," Susie observed, when the show was over, "but I'll swear it's the nearest Tewborough's got to a riot since the Number Two Touring Company of *A Royal Divorce* first came here in the year Dot. And we pulled together, didn't we, children?"

The children admitted that they had and returned to their various lodgings, which were all either so dismal or sinister that already a place had been found for them in the archives, with the cue—"My dear, did you ever play a hole called Tewborough?', well content, happy in the knowledge that the party was itself again and that to-morrow it would seek fresh streets and lodgings new. Thus ended the Black Week.

CHAPTER V

ALL STOLEN FROM THE MAIL BAG

I

From Miss Elsie Longstaff to Miss Effie Longstaff

c/o Mrs. Bottomley,
23 Jagger Street,
Luddenstall,
Yorks.
19th December.

Dear Effie:

I got the things alright and ought to have written before this but we did some Three Nights and you know what it is don't you, all packing and etc. Now we are here for what you can call a run!—till into the New Year at a sort of concert hall and picture place combined, not so big but comfy and clean, good stage and lighting etc.—all marvellous compared with what we have been playing lately I can tell you! Comfy rooms here too and on my own at last. Thank goodness, I got sick to death of having Susie Dean poking about all the time, not that we are not friends we are but you know what it is, my dear! Show looks like going well here, Good old Yorks. I say, if you can get them going up here they will stick to you alright every time. I had one encore last night and could have had another but of course I was told programme would not stand it. Too much Susie Dean and J. Jerningham in the programme if you ask me these days, what with the piano player writing songs for them as well and all that! His name is Inigo Jollifant says its real too!—and he is quite a nice boy but the way he goes mooning round S. Dean and the way she keeps him dangling would make you sick if it didn't make you laugh. Kids game, I call it, but then thats all they are!

Well we look like having a nice Xmas for once. Playing Xmas Eve and then just one show on Boxing Day. Can you get off to come up, I don't suppose you can, and I am wondering if I could manage it just for Xmas Day as its not so far. Are you still at the George or have you gone to the Vic as you said you might, and does Charlie come in and Jimmy and that tall fellow with the specs and all that lot, if they do just give them my love and tell them to be good boys till I come back! And guess who I saw here the very second day. I went into Leeds in the morning looking round shops—I nearly bought a new coat in a little shop just off Briggate that was having a sale, large wrap in front and straight inlets carried down back and collar and cuffs and flounces lovely fur, just like real, and only £4. 19. 6 reduced from seven gns, but I couldn't run to it though if I wear my old black much longer they will be throwing things at me in the street. Well I got in the train to come back in the afternoon and guess who got into the very same carriage, you should have seen him jump, that boy we met at Scarborough year before last when I was with The Bluebells, you remember! It was the taller one with the light moustache who acted he was tight that time, Sunday night at the Crown, and he told me he would come to Luddenstall whenever I liked and gave me his office address and tel. no. so I shan't exactly be lonely. He asked to be remembered to you and I had to tell you that his friend was married now. I am sorry for his wife, what do you say, my dear!

I am getting you some hankies, will let you have them to-morrow or day after. If you have not got anything for me yet make it a pair of silk stockings bit darker than usual shade I like to go with my red, if it will run to it. Give Uncle Arthur my love and tell him I am getting him a pipe once again, and let me know soon as you can if you can come but if you can, no bringing Ethel Golliver this time, you know what it was last time she came along! I like a bit of fun, my dear, but Ethel would get me run out of this show and out of the town as well! Is it true she is living with—you know, the fellow we used to call Pink Percy—doesn't surprise me! Chin-chin, Effie my dear, and all the best for Xmas!

Elsie.

II

From Mrs. Joe Brundit to her sister, Mrs. Sorly, of Denmark Hill

c/o Mrs. Andrews,
5 Clough Street,
Luddenstall,
Yorks.
21st December.

Dearest Clara:

You will be glad to hear the Luck is in for once—we are here right over the Holidays and the rooms are very nice, the landlady most obliging person—so that there will be *no* difficulty about George coming—isn't that splendid! If Jim can see him on the train at King's Cross or get some one to see him in, some one *dependable* of course, then either Jim or who ever it is seek out a carriage for Leeds with some nice person who is coming to Leeds—and ask them if they would mind keeping an eye on George on the way—specially *not* letting him go into the corridor by himself or play with the window. Perhaps if you could spare the time, my dear, it would be best—and any nice person would be glad of the company of such a bright boy as George, don't you think? Of course this is further on than Leeds but then we can meet the train there and that means no changing for him, and Joe has found out the *exact* train, which is 8.45 in the morning from King's Cross, please don't forget—8.45 *in the morning*, and the day after tomorrow, that is the 23rd. You could send us a wire saying he is safely off. Here is the P.O. for the fare, *half* of course. And I know you will see he has his proper things with him and is well wrapped up for the journey—it is *much colder* here of course than it is with you—and has a bun or two and perhaps a bit of chocolate and some of those comic picture papers to look at. You can imagine, my dear, what a relief it is to have some one like you that a Mother can trust!

So this is going to be a proper Christmas for us for

once and I am sure I don't know which is the most excited about it, Joe or me, for we have been buying toys and things for George's stocking—not that he believes in S. Claus still of course, I know that, but surely he will like to hang his stocking up—and we have made arrangements for a real Christmas Dinner—and Miss Trant has got George an invitation to a big Children's Party there is to be in the town on Boxing Day afternoon. Now that money is coming in regularly again, not missing a week here and a week there, with rooms and meals to pay for all the time, it makes such a difference, gives you *Confidence* again—so that—touch wood—things look altogether brighter and when we have our own dear child with us and have a happy Christmas altogether, I shall be a new woman! Would you believe it—a month ago I was in the *Depths* of Despair—we were all in them, even Joe, who may have his faults but hardly ever gives up hoping and taking a cheerful View, as you know—and then everything suddenly turned round. The Show is going magnificently—good houses every night and you could not want a better audience, a real taste for Good music into the bargain. I have been asked to give two items at a Sacred Concert here, in connection with the Wesleyans or Congregationals, I forget which—and Joe has been offered 15/— for two items any Sunday evening at the Labour Club here, Mrs. Andrews' husband being a member and though a little rough and ready perhaps a gentleman at heart. So we have *Everything* to be thankful for as things have turned out.

It seems to be the same with everybody here—though Goodness knows it can't last. Jimmy Nunn, our com., says he is better than he has been for the last two years and looks it—and our pianist keeps up well and is as I said he was from the first as nice a young fellow as you could wish to find—and Miss Trant is a perfect lady to us all, does everything she can for us—and everybody is not only on speaking terms, and you know how rare that is, but is really friendly and nice—so that we might almost be a Happy Family. I am sure I have never wanted George to

know anything about the Stage or to see me at work, and I have told you so many a time—haven't I—but I am sure if there ever was a Time or Place where it was all right for him to do so, this is it!

The enclosed bag is offered with love, Clara, and gratitude for what you have done for George—and best wishes for a Happy Christmas, though it may not seem as if I meant it when I am taking George away from you just at this festive season, but you can imagine what it means to a Mother! As soon as I saw it in the shop I said to Joe—That will just do for Clara, she'll love it. And he said, No she won't, what put that idea into your head. And we argued about it quite a time before I found he was looking at the wrong thing and thought I was pointing to a fretwork outfit—just like a Man! He sends his love and best wishes to you and Jim and says if you can put it into George's head that he wants a clockwork train and a signal box etc.—so much the better.

Your loving sister,

MAG.

III

From Jimmy Nunn to Mrs. Nunn

c/o MRS. SHAW,
17 CLOUGH STREET,
LUDDENSTALL,
YORKS.
23rd December.

DEAR CARRIE,

Just a line to let you know where I am and to say I am feeling better than I have done for the last year or two, and to wish you the Compliments of the Season. And I mean it too—a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year—so don't you go sniffing about it. We can be friends in our own way even if we can't settle down together any more. I think kindly of you, Carrie, honestly I do, and I wish you to do the same for me. I know you don't want to come round the country with me and don't want to have

anything to do with the Boards any more, and you know very well I can't spend the rest of my life sitting in the back of that shop of yours, doing up a parcel now and again. If we are both happy in our own way there's nothing to grumble at, I say. If Alice had lived, it might have been different. Never you mind what people say—tell them to mind their own business. Or say it's by doctor's orders I am still on the move.

I am glad to say you're wrong about this Show. Seeing it that night at Tewborough, when everybody and everything was all of a doodah, gave you a wrong idea of it, I can tell you. It's got going properly now and they are eating it here, and before long we shall be making money out of it and good money too. And what you say about the boss, Miss Trant, is all wrong too. She's one of the very best. And who do you think I ran into the other day in Leeds—old Tuppy Tanner—he's opening at the Royal panto there to-morrow as Baron Hard-up. Just the same only fatter than ever—and he was telling me his daughter Mona is playing principal girl at Birmingham this year—makes you think a bit, doesn't it—time flies. It doesn't seem more than a year or two since we all had that season together in Douglas—do you remember—when Tuppy fell into the sea and you nursed his little girl through the measles or something—and now she's getting her twenty a week at Birmingham and engaged to be married, Tupp tells me. Wasn't that the time poor Jack Dean kept getting so tight and got into trouble with that little Italian woman who was at the Palace and we had to keep hiding him? Little Susie here is always asking me about him—and, my word, I could tell her some tales if I wanted to—make her hair curl even though she has knocked about a bit herself—but of course I draw it mild. I don't suppose you want to know about her because you never liked poor Jack and he never liked you, but Susie is coming on fast and the first time a big man who knows a winner when he sees one happens to look at her act—it's good-bye to the Concert Party for little Susie. And I shan't try to stop her—let her

have a chance, I say. I wouldn't know what to do with it, if I had a big chance now—I'm getting on and lazy—and the old round is good enough for me. If you ever wanted to see my name up in electric lights, you shouldn't have kept me back that time when old Wurlstein came round at Glasgow with the contract in his pocket. You didn't want to risk it but I did—but there—that's all done with—I'm up here and you're there with your shop, and we're both comfortable.

What about this for a letter! I'll be writing the Story of My Life next, after this. Now Carrie, no harm done between you and me, what do you say, and all the best for the New Year. If you see that young doctor, tell him I'm still taking that stuff and he's a marvel.

Yrs,
JIMMY.

IV

From Jerry Jerningham to Lady Partlit

c/o MRS. LONG,
6 BURY ROAD,
LUDDENSTALL,
YORKS.
24th December.

DEAR LADY PARTLIT:

Thank you very much for the cig. case which arrived at The Ionic yesterday. How did you know we were playing here—did you see it in *The Stage*—it was a bit risky sending such a lovely case like that. Yes I was very surprised to get it and hear from you after what went on between us at Tewborough that week, but I must say I have been thinking some time I was too hasty and that after all it was not your fault so I will say now I am sorry—and not just because you have given me such a *beautiful* present and said such nice things in yr letter about my work. I am also sorry you are going out of England for a month or two because I should like you to see the Show again now it is going better and I have more chance, having got four

new nos.—three of them written by our pianist who I must say is clever and a coming man in the song-world if only he takes his work seriously like I do. I must say the Show is going better than ever I thought it would now—though as you know it has got at least four dud people in it, and you are right when you say that I am wasted in this C. P. work, though I cannot grumble about the way my act is going here—two or three encores every night and more wanted. But you have guessed right when you say it does not satisfy me and I am working hard all the time at new steps etc. so that when my chance does come the people who give it me will not regret it.

No I do not spend my time walking out pretty Yorkshire girls as you suggest—though if I wanted to I have no doubt I could do so alright—but even if they were a lot prettier then they are I should not let them take up my time just now. And if I was rude I am very sorry and thank you once again for the lovely present. I have just had new photo taken and thought you might like a signed copy.

Sincerely yours,
JERRY JERNINGHAM.

P. S. A letter sent to my perm. ad.—175 Fiscal Street, Birmingham, will always be sent on to me.

V

Mr. Morton Mitcham to Gus Jeffson Esq., Eccentric Club

THE IONIC,
LUDDENSTALL,
YORKS.
26th December.

DEAR SIR:

Re. your article "Touring Out East" in last week's *Stage*, you say your Co. was the first to play Penang, but I was there with the old *Prince of Pimlico Co.* a good three years before that, running down from Singapore. Refer "Thirty Years in the Straits Settlements" by J. G. Thomson Esq. for account of Show and a photo of party, self in-

cluded. *And* I'm still going strong—now playing at Ionic here, successful winter season with well-known Good Companions Co. (E. Trant & J. Nunn). Forgive correction and accept good wishes of another old pro who has done his share of Touring Out East—those were great days.

Believe me, Yrs. truly,

MORTON MITCHAM.

VI

From Susie Dean to Miss Kitty Mackay, "The Multi-Million Girl" Co., Empire, Cardiff

c/o MRS. WRIGHT,
11 JAGGER STREET,
LUDDENSTALL,
YORKS.
27th December.

DARLING KITTY:

Your letter only arrived this morning—after wandering round all over the place—but I see you are in Cardiff so this will get you at once. It was sweet of you to think of me like that—I shan't forget, my dear!—and three months ago I would have jumped at it, jumped at anything nearly—to say nothing of South Africa! I've always *longed* to travel—to go *everywhere*—wearing white and helmets and anything—and some day I will—with a private carriage or whatever it is the stars do have. But now I have just got to turn it down—don't ask me for exact reasons, my dear, you know how one feels about a thing!—it isn't the money—there's absolutely *nothing* wrong with your man's offer, I assure you, and I know I am lucky to get it—and here it is only Five a week, though marvellously regular, I can tell you, like clockwork—which of course makes a difference. But I have simply got to go on with this Good Companions show just now—it's been made out of the ruins of Mildenhall's rotten old Dinky Doos—an angel of a woman, very erect, y'know, and tweedy, and straight out of the Old Moated Grange from Little Widdleton-on-the-Wortleberry—yes, the real thing—popped up from nowhere

in a car—blushed a bit and looked very brave—paid everything and started us off again, all on her own, not knowing the first thing about it! If you could only see her—you would see at once it was the maddest and loveliest thing that ever happened, her doing this. And she lost money hand-over-fist for weeks and weeks—and not a murmur—and now she is beginning to get a little back again—and before she *makes* some, I don't stir an inch from this show—not if they offer me Daly's—though I must say they haven't given any signs of doing so yet.

Has ta ivver played Luddenstall, lass?—it's nobbut a little pla-a-ace i' Yorkshire—and as usual looks like a Gas Works all spread out—but I will say this, they know a good show when they see it here—packed house every night, *really*, and giving the little girl a hand every night—you should just hear them! And they ask us to parties—I was the regular Belle of the Ball at a dance here on Boxing Night after the show—presented the prizes and was given a box of chocolates as big as a suitcase—nay, lass, shut oop! Really though, as far as Luddenstall and district is concerned, we have the Leeds pantos knocked flat. And I have a feeling the luck's going on—and that sooner or later *Something* will happen. So no S. Africa just now, you see.

The two Brundits are still with us—and I'm glad, though they're not exactly Covent Garden, are they?—but darlings all the same. Good old Jimmy is still here—better too—and though I know all his jokes off by heart, about as well as he does—he seems to be as good a little comedian as there is in C. P. work—and better than some up aloft among the electric lights. Jerry Jerningham's here too—and going strong, I must say, and better to work with than he used to be—and the girls here follow him round with their tongues hanging out, as usual—but away from the tabs he's the same as ever, 1 gent's outfit, 1 dose of brilliantine, 5 cigarettes, 1 good opinion of himself, 3 bleats—and then nothing—that's our little friend Jerry. Then there's our new pianist, who let himself be called Inigo Jollifant—he's

an amateur really, was a schoolmaster, Cambridge Varsity and baggy flannel trousers and the same weird tie every day and "Give me my Pipe" and all that, wants to write books and is very Lofty and Highbrow when he remembers to be—but quite clean and *really* very very clever and he's writing the most marvellous numbers for me, miles and miles beyond anything that comes from Shaftesbury Avenue these days. One of these nights, somebody from the West End or thereabouts will hear these numbers and then, my dear, I assure his fortune is made—absolutely, as he always says. He is really rather sweet and we have lots of fun together—No, my dear, I'm *not,* quite decidedly not—we are just good friends, that's all, at least on my side. You don't say a word about Eric—I do hope it's all right.

If it was Canada instead of South Africa, there's a little man here who would be just dying to come with you. He is our property man and stage carpenter—a little Yorkshireman, not little really but you think of him being little because he is such a darling—and he too popped up from nowhere and is now one of the family—you should have seen him and heard him this Christmas here, telling all these other Yorkshire people where he had been and what he had seen—eh, it wor right champion, lass! He wants to go to Canada because he has a daughter there—ahr Lily, he calls her—and because I'm supposed to be like her (Lord help me!), he simply adores me. Oh, I forgot there's also an old boy called Morton Mitcham, banjoist and conjurer, we picked up on the road—very weird, Laddie, very weird—not a bad turn, but easily the champion liar of the Profession! He certainly has knocked about in his time, but if he was a hundred and fifty years old and had never stopped touring, he would still be lying, the yarns he spins!

Yes, I know it all sounds very queer—and I'll bet we are easily the oddest C.P. on the road—but honestly we're the nicest too, and I only wish you were nearer and could come and have a look at us. Well, that's all, my dear—but don't forget I really am most affectionately grateful for the offer, and you do understand, don't you, why I can't accept.

But don't go and imagine I'm glued to the piffling C.P. business! Not a bit of it! Very shortly, you'll see, I shall be Blossoming Out—and then I shall expect a cable from S. Africa when the news gets through. Best of luck to you all, Kitty darling.

Ever Yours,
SUSIE.

VII

From Inigo Jollifant to Robert Fauntley, Washbury Manor School

c/o MRS. JUGG,
3 CLOUGH STREET,
LUDDENSTALL,
YORKS.
29th December.

DEAR FAUNTLEY:

Many thanks for sending on those odds and ends so promptly. I ought to have written before, I know. Now I have to send this to the school and risk its being forwarded on to you. If the envelope looks messy at the back, you will know that Ma Tarvin has steamed it open—using a hot prune for the purpose: and if you don't get it at all, you will know she has destroyed your letter—ha ha! Your Washbury news was welcome but all very strange—like a message from Mars. Glad I am that the fair Daisy has departed—may she marry the outpost-of-Empire lad in the Sudan and may he be bronzed and lean and carry her photograph, in a silver frame, with him into Wildest Africa. The new man—vice Jollifant—certainly sounds a shrimp—a lesser Felton—and who would have thought that possible? I sent Ma Tarvin *a Christmas Card!!* It was the sweetest I could find, with little birdies in the snow, and it said:

A heart-felt wish through rain or shine
In memory dear of Auld Lang Syne

or something like that. (Ask her about Christmas Cards when you get back.) Then, passing a dirty little shop here

the other day, a most highly coloured and vulgar postcard caught my eye—the caption was "You can see a lot at Blackpool" and you can imagine the picture above—and this I despatched, naked and outrageous, to friend Felton in his beautiful refined home at Clifton. Felton is the only human being who still collects picture postcards—the British Museum and South Kensington kind, of course—but I have the feeling that mine has not been added to the collection. Dear, dear!

Can you imagine being a Pierrot in Luddenstall, Yorks! Can you imagine Luddenstall! It is a smallish town, black as your best hat, and it is joined on to other and bigger towns, equally black, by tram lines. I never saw so many trams. They turn them into mountain railways here; you see them going up vertically. All the streets here are at an angle of at least 45 degrees, everything built of stone, and they run down from a bleak hillside that is really the end of a huge dark moor. Last Sunday, I walked miles and miles on this moor—it has black stone walls like snakes twisting across it—until at last it began to frighten me. It's ridiculous to say this place is in England—quite another country really. Both Miss Trant (she runs this troupe—God knows why!—and comes from the Cotswolds) and I, after much discussion, have agreed upon that. The people here work—the women never stop—and go to football matches, drink old beer (very good stuff), listen to Handel's Messiah about twice a week, and make you eat cheese with cake.

I am, as you see, *chez* Jugg. It's a capital name for the gentleman because nearly every time I see him he has a jug in his hand, being among the most stalwart devotees of the aforesaid old beer, which has to be "fetched i' jug." He can give old Omar himself points in not believing in anything, for he has cut out the book of verse, most of the loaf, and the Houri stuff, and just sticks to the jug, though he has added a clay pipe and is one up on Omar there. He is very dry and cynical. Mrs. Jugg reminds me vaguely of Henry the Eighth (she must be roughly the same shape, I

think); she works harder than anybody I have ever heard of; and always looks so terribly exasperated that you would think her cooking would be atrocious, because everything she does is slammed in at the last minute, but it all turns out to be beautiful in the end—it's like a conjuring trick. The only amusement she has is going "to t' chapel o' Sunday neet," but after a lot of argument I persuaded her to accept a ticket to our show the other night. What was the result? "Eh!" she said. But it's a long sound she makes, rather like a sheep. "Eh!" she said, "it wer right good but I missed most on it because I fell asleep. Seat were so comfortable and I wer so tired." Which seemed to me rather pathetic. I've been a fortnight here now and so am very pally with both Juggs. They are the best people I've lodged with so far, and this is our best town, in spite of its being so queer. We've had some horrors, I assure you. You don't know what Merrie England is like until you tour it with a pierrot troupe.

Do you remember telling me I ought to do something with those little tunes I used to improvise? Well, I am making them into songs now—and everybody seems to like them—and the people in the show, especially the chief girl here (her name is Susie Dean and besides being a most delightful girl, she really is a genius—you wait!), seem to think I ought to make some money out of them. I think I shall try soon. I've written two essays—quite good too—and sent them to several papers, but they've come back—"Editor regrets," etc.—every time. It staggers me when I consider the bosh they do print, but I suppose it's difficult for an outsider—a pierrot at that!—to get in; and I feel like trying to make as much money as I can out of this silly song-writing stunt and then write at leisure. Meanwhile I pound the keys every night and take it easy during the day. We're an amusing crowd—we had a really jolly Christmas, best I ever had, I think—and though I don't see myself going on with this for ever, so far it's more fun than ramming French and History into the offspring of our Empire builders and then trying to eat the Tarvin

rissoles and stewed prunes. Luddenstall is as ugly as an old road engine, but it has one advantage over Washbury Manor, my dear Fauntley—it's Alive! And so am I—never more so. And I hope you are too, and will have a good New Year.

Yours sincerely,
INIGO JOLLIFANT.

VIII

From Miss Trant to Mrs. Gerald Atkinson (née Dorothy Chillingford), Kenya Colony

LUDDENSTALL,
YORKS.
31st December.

MY DEAR DOROTHY:

Your last letter only arrived here two days ago. I am so glad you are finding things so much better and that Gerald has got the extra land he wanted. You sound so happy. Isn't it fantastic—you out there, and me here? No, I have not been back to Hitherton at all. If we had been nearer these holidays I should have gone, just to see your dear father and mother, the Purtons, and everybody, but it could not be done—so I sent letters and little presents instead. It's been the *most* absurd Christmas I ever had—here in this dark and bleak little Yorkshire manufacturing town, where everybody talks like our delicious little Yorkshire property man, Oakroyd, whom I described to you before. Of course everybody seems dreadfully rude at first. You go into a shop and they say: "Well, what do *you* want, young woman?"—though the "young" is rather comforting. But I am used to it now, and really nobody could have been kinder and nicer than these people and we were lucky—for once!—coming here during the holidays because they are Christmassy sort of people. As you insist on having what you call "theatrical intelligence," I may say that I am actually at last making a *Profit!*—that is, on each week, though of course I have not yet made up what I have lost so far. But it's so exciting to have really

crowded and enthusiastic audiences, enjoying everything, and it's made the most wonderful difference to the members of the party, who are working splendidly now.

It's ridiculous, of course, but I am becoming the complete theatrical manager. The other day I actually had an offer for the whole troupe—and refused it! After the show one night last week, a card was handed in with a request for an interview, and in came a large fat shabby man, rather beery and pimply but very amiable (too amiable!), and he was Mr. Ernie Codd, from Leeds. He insisted on shaking my hand and breathing on me for about five minutes, and in a very wheezy voice kept saying "Pretty little show! Taking little show! Congrats on the show, Miss Bant! I'm Ernie Codd! They all know Ernie! Now listen here, just listen!" When at last I succeeded in getting back my hand and assuring him I *was* listening, he said something about having the scenery and props and script of a revue (I think its name was "And You're Another!"—I know he said it was "a Winner and a sure-fire Screamer!") and one of the neatest little troupes of dancing girls I had ever set eyes on outside the West End radius, and he would take over my Good Companions lock, stock, and barrel at Fifty Per, or sign them on separately with myself, Miss Bant, as assistant manager on a profit-sharing basis. I am trying, my dear, to give you an impression of the way he rattled all this off, with any amount of gesticulation and heavy breathing. It took me twenty minutes—and even then I had to bring in Mr. Nunn—to make him believe that I had no intention of accepting his offer. I never saw a man so surprised—or at least appear to be so surprised—as he was when he finally understood that we did not want to be taken over by Mr. Codd and his friends. I was very amused (and would have been more amused if Mr. Codd had been rather cleaner and not so much given to shaking hands) but I was also rather thrilled. Mr. Nunn, who knows all about these things and is my chief adviser, was delighted, and said that though he would not trust Ernie Codd as far as he could see him,

the offer was a feather in our caps. It must all sound very silly to you, miles and miles away, but you must allow me my little triumphs. Things really are looking up.

Some local Commercial Travellers' Association gave a children's party here the other afternoon and somehow the secretary got hold of my name and insisted on Susie—the very charming and clever girl I told you about—and I giving the prizes. We loved it. And talking of children, I must tell you about Mr. and Mrs. Joe Brundit, my baritone and soprano. I hope you remember my description of them because the story rather hangs on that. But, as I told you before, they have a little boy called George, whom they both worship. He lives with an aunt at Denmark Hill, but they were able to have him with them this Christmas here. For days they thought and talked about nothing else. Every penny they had went on toys for his stocking and for treats for him. When the time came, they were nearly delirious with excitement. I remember hoping then that he was a nice little boy who would appreciate what they were doing for him. And of course—that sounds pessimistic, but you know how wretchedly things so often turn out—he wasn't a nice little boy, but a horrid sulky stupid little wretch. He didn't like any of the toys they gave him, and told them so very plainly. He didn't like Luddenstall, and kept saying he wanted to go back to Denmark Hill. He broke some things at their lodgings and was very rude to the landlady, who promptly slapped him (a thing I have been tempted to do myself), with the result that Mrs. Joe quarrelled with her at once and finally had to find new lodgings for them all. They brought him to the theatre and he was such a nuisance that everybody said he must not be allowed to come again. He went to the children's party, got into mischief at once, then was sulky and cross, and ended by being sick. Never was there such a disastrous visit! And all the time the poor things have been pretending they were not disappointed or anything, until we did not know whether to laugh or cry. On the whole, I felt more like weeping. Poor simple Joe!—and

poor simple Mrs. Joe!—she is tremendously dignified and superior, as I told you, but really, if anything, she's the simpler of the two. They have decided now that George isn't strong—put it all down to ill health—though the little wretch is really as strong as an ox and only wants a good slapping from time to time to keep him in order.

My dear, if you are going to be so absurd, I shall begin to wish I had never told you about that episode—for that's all it was. Of course I haven't seen "Dr. Hugh McFarlane on my travels." Why should I have? I don't even know if he lives in this country, though I must confess I feel confident he does live somewhere, still exists. I don't suppose he would even recognise me now. Yes, I know "there is such a thing as a Medical Register," as you put it—I'm sure you're becoming quite Colonial and brusque these days—but I have never had a peep at it, no, not the tiniest peep. If you could see me these days, you would understand why I am not worrying about any episode from ancient history. In less than a week, we move on again. Did I tell you I had made Hilda co-operate with me?—she helped me with some dresses for a sort of Mid-Victorian song-scena we are giving now—and one that I planned myself!

For the last few days, the hill-tops to the West have been white, and I had a glimpse the other morning of the moors there, all silent and almost covered with snow, quite lonely and terrifying, and now it is beginning to snow properly down here and all the black roofs and hard lines are disappearing so that even Luddenstall looks rather like a place in an old fairy-tale! And very soon the bells will ring in the New Year. I hope it will be a happy one for you, my dear. I'm sure it will, though. And somehow I like the sound of it too. Love to you both.

Yours,

ELIZABETH.

IX

And as the snow drifted high on the moorland above and came whirling down in soft flakes to the valley below, until at last every roof in Luddenstall was thick and whitened and all the streets were touched with Northern magic; as they raised their glasses and joined hands and sang in chorus, and bells that seemed as old and mysterious as the flying and feathered night itself rang out the Old, rang in the New—the last letter of all was being carried through a black and dripping railway cutting in the hills, to be slung with a thousand others on board a liner that would soon go hooting through the dark to Canada:

My dear Daughter:

I am writing these lines to say I am still in the pink and hoping you are the same. We are now in Good Old Yorks, and so had a good and merry Xmas. I had my Xmas dinner with Landlady and Family and had goose and pudding and etc. I wish you had been there Lily, to keep your old Father company. I went on tram to Bruddersford and called at 51. Your Mother was looking poorly but when I asked her said she was alright and as she was a bit short with me could get nothing out of her. Albert is still there but did not see him and was glad not to but I saw our Leonard who is doing well. Your Mother told me you had not written to her only to me so I think Lily you had better write to her as well sometime for she is your Mother when all is said and done and as I say is looking poorly. The Good Comps. are going well here and will do so, if I know any thing, at other places on the road. Wishing you and Jack a Happy New Year and all the best. Keep on writing to me at 51 and they will send on. And keep your heart up Lily we will have a good laugh the two of us yet together, With love and kisses,

from yr Father,

J. Oakroyd.

BOOK III

CHAPTER I

A WIND IN THE TRIANGLE

I

The March wind went shrieking over the Midland Plain. Under a sky as rapid, ragged and tumultuous as a revolution, all the standing water, the gathered thaws and rains of February, filling the dykes and spreading over innumerable fields, was ruffled and whitened, so that the day glittered coldly. There was ice even yet in this wind, but already there were other things too, shreds and tatters of sunlight, sudden spicy gusts, distant trumpetings of green armies on the march. Unless you were one of the patient men of the fields, following the great shining flanks of your horses across the ten-acre and already hearing the sap stirring, you did not know what to do in the face of such a wind. It was up to all manner of tricks. "Grrrr! Get indoors and stay there!" it would go screaming. "Poke the fire! Whe-ew!" And it might send a lash of hail after you. But then not quarter of an hour later, it might be crying "Come out, come out! The year's begun," promising primroses, and spilling a little pale sunlight down the road. The moment you did go out, however, it would give a sharp twitch, darkening the sky again, and with a long *Whe-ew Grrrr!* would sting your cheeks and set your eyes watering. A most mischievous wind.

Away it went, across the central plain of England, until at last it pounced upon those three little industrial towns, Gatford, Mundley and Stort, that are known as the Triangle, and more recently, since the towns gave themselves up to the mass production of cheap cars, the Tin Triangle. There are very few towns in this island so close

together as Gatford, Mundley and Stort, and a stranger might easily imagine they were all one town. On the other hand, there are hardly any other towns that seem further away from anywhere else: Gatford jostles Mundley and Stort, and Mundley and Stort creep closer to one another; but the three of them appear to be almost as remote as a constellation from any other place of importance. Those short non-stop runs on the railway from Gatford to either Manchester or Birmingham always seem miraculous; and when that daily procession of brand-new cars, shiny saloons or chassis with drivers perched on boxes, slides away down the London Road, it strikes the visitor as a most hazardous enterprise, an adventure. The Trianglers themselves, too, regard this daily departure of new *Imperial Sixes* and *Lumbdens* and *Baby Sceptres* as part of a great adventure. Nowadays cars pour out and money pours into the Triangle. It is said that J. J. Lumbden, the son of old Lumbden who kept the bicycle shop in Cobden Street, Gatford, is worth nearly half a million and steadfastly refuses the most gigantic offers from America. The Sceptre people are building yet another factory between Mundley and Stort. And nobody can say there is anything tinny about the *Imperial Six,* the pride of North Gatford and Stort, where every other man is a mechanic. There is hardly a schoolboy in the Triangle, even in South Gatford, where there are detached villas and tennis clubs and boulevards, who does not groan with impatience, to think he is wasting his time with stuff about Magna Charta and Rivers of South America and Adverbs when he might be working in one of the car factories, swaggering out at half-past five, very black and knowing. Useless to talk to the Triangle about bad trade and what might be done with the unemployed; it never knew such days before; Gatford is nearly twice the size it was twenty years ago, and Mundley and Stort, invaded by mechanics from every part of the Midlands, are growing visibly, at the rate of so many new little red bricks per fine working day. These are adventurous times for the three towns. The March wind, itself

supremely adventurous, pounced upon them with glee. Here, it seemed to shout, was something better to play with than naked fields and branches and thin tremulous sheets of water.

It swooped down and charged the steady swarm of cars, the trams that lumber from Gatford to Mundley, Stort to Mundley, Gatford to Stort, the buses that dodge and hoot at and overtake these trams. It whipped off a loose tile and even a chimney pot here and there. After seeking out any tattered posters on the hoardings and turning them into drums, it rounded up all the odd pieces of paper in the streets and compelled them to join in a witches' Sabbath. This most mischievous wind then found an open window on the second floor of a building in Victoria Street, Gatford, sent some papers skimming from the table to the floor, and compelled a certain gentleman, who had been staring at some figures and now found himself shivering, to look up and speak crossly to his companion and employee. This is Mr. Ridvers, but when he is in this tiny office he calls himself the Triangle New Era Cinema Co., and it is from here he controls the destinies of The Tivoli Picture Palace, Gatford, The Coliseum Picture House, Mundley, and the Royal Cinema, Stort, the only three cinemas of any importance in the district.

"For God's sake, Ethel," he said, "shut that window. Look at those letters—all over the damn floor. Besides, it's cold."

From behind her typewriter, Ethel gave him a curious sideways look. She was a girl in her twenties, with a rather flat Mongolian face, hard staring eyes and a thick daubed mouth. "It was you who wanted it open," she remarked. "Told you it was cold."

"Well, I want it shut now," he grunted, without looking up again from the papers in his hand.

"All right, all right," and she closed the window. There was nothing respectful in her tones, and there was something downright disrespectful in the way she moved. The exaggerated thrust and lift of her shoulders gave the im-

pression that her body was making really impudent remarks about her employer. There was a suggestion that it had the right to make such remarks and that he knew very well it had.

Mr. Ridvers examined the figures before him a minute or two longer, than stood up and threw the papers on the table. He found a half-smoked cigar in the ash-tray, relit it and pulled furiously at it, frowning all the time. Ethel watched him out of the corner of her eye with amusement. He had been in a bad mood all morning and now he was obviously very angry indeed. As a matter of fact, he was a middle-aged man who ate too much, drank far too much whisky, took too little exercise, and was plagued by an outraged liver. He had his grievances, but it was really the sudden cold lash of the wind that had now put a sharp edge on his temper.

"Well?" And there was a certain malice in Ethel's query.

"Well nothing!" he exploded. "These returns are worse than I thought. It was Stort last week. I suppose it'll be Mundley this week. I'd never have believed it. These flaming little pierrots are knocking hell out of the returns."

"I told you what it would be."

"Oh, for God's sake, don't start that! Never knew a woman yet who didn't think she'd gone and told me everything. People here must have gone balmy. Pierrots!"

"They're crowded out every night," said Ethel.

"Yes, I know they are. I'm not silly. Even so, they oughtn't to have knocked us like this. Damn it all, there ought to be enough money in these three towns to keep us going as usual even if they are crowded out. I've given 'em good programmes."

"I don't know about that," Ethel replied coolly. "You know very well you cut it a bit on the renting."

"What if I did? Matter of fact I had to cut it to show Farrow and his Syndicate a good margin. And what diff'rence does it make, what I paid for the renting. They've never seen the bloody pictures before, have they? Well then! No, it's this pierrot show that's done it. Who ever would have thought it! Talk about luck!"

"I hear they're putting the prices up too," said Ethel, who seemed to delight in flicking him on the raw.

"They would!" cried Mr. Ridvers bitterly. "That means all the less money for us. Seems to me if these people spend two and four they've finished for the week. Luck! They won't even let me smell it." And Mr. Ridvers made a number of sounds to express his disgust and then savagely jammed his cigar against the ash-tray.

"I don't know what you're going on like this for," said Ethel, who probably knew very well. "A few bad weeks won't kill you."

Mr. Ridvers made a large gesture of despair. "Oh, have a bit of sense, Ethel. Won't kill me! I don't know what you sit there for, I honestly don't."

"Oh, don't you?" cried Ethel, staring at him hard. "Well, I'm not always sitting here, am I, *Mister* Ridvers? Trying to turn me into a dummy or what?"

"All right, Ethel, easy, easy," he replied, giving her shoulder a perfunctory pat, under which it squirmed. "But I've told you before. Farrow and his P.P.H. Syndicate," he went on, with ferocious deliberation, "are making me an offer for my three halls. You know that? All right then. That-offer-is-to-be-based-on-two-months'-returns-of-these-three-halls. The price is according. Or, if they don't like the look of them, they won't deal. They'll buy elsewhere. Or—what's a damn sight worse—they'll come here and build their own. And you know as well as I do what's happened to our returns. And I ask you, who'd have thought a piebald, blink-eyed, bread-and-dripping little pierrot show, filling in time till it can get a pitch on the sands again, would have knocked 'em all silly here like that!"

"I went out to Mundley last night to see them," said Ethel. "Fellow took me. Packed out they were too. It's a clever show—bit slow in parts, 'specially the women, but it's clever. They've a boy there who dances—name's Jer-

ningham—who got me all right. Talk about dancing! And looks! He's got the film fellows well beaten, that boy has. Tricky songs too."

"You're sillier than I thought you were," Mr. Ridvers growled. "With your dancing boys! They've another week at Mundley Rink, haven't they, after this? And then back to Gatford here again. I see they've got the Hippodrome plastered with bills already. And I went to Billy Roberts and told him I didn't want 'em back if possible and he owed me a good turn or two and he said he'd stiffen the terms—they hadn't taken it again then, you see—and make this woman who's running the show rent it and shove all sorts of responsibility on to her. But that's not frightened her, seemingly."

"Why should it?" said Ethel. "I know it wouldn't frighten me. She's safe as houses here now—can't lose."

Mr. Ridvers thought for a few moments. "Here," he cried finally, "where is this woman or whoever it is that's running these *Companions* or whatever they call themselves? Over at Mundley, I suppose?"

"No, she's not. They're all here, in Gatford, been staying here all the time and just running out to Stort and Mundley at night for the show. Her name's Trant, and she's staying at *The Crown.*"

"You seem to know a devil of a lot about them," said Mr. Ridvers, facing her across the table. "Quite one of the pierrot fanciers, aren't you! Must be the dancing boy. Well, don't start any tricks, that's all."

"I don't start tricks," she replied shrilly. "And if I did, I wouldn't ask your permission, Mr. Charlie Ridvers. You get your money's worth out of me, don't you? Start tricks! You're a nice one to talk."

"Oh, dry up," said Mr. Ridvers. "Can't you see I've enough damn bother on my hands without you making trouble? I'm worried, that's what I am, and I don't mind admitting it." He took down his hat and overcoat. "I'm going across to *The Crown* to have a little bit of a talk to this pierrot woman—what's her name?—Trant. That's what I'm going to do."

"And a fat lot of good it'll do you," cried Ethel. "What can you say to her? Silly, I call it."

"Never mind what you call it. And never mind what I can say to her," he replied, with the air of a man who had produced a crushing retort. He had no idea himself what he could say to this Miss Trant that would be of the slightest use, but he looked both knowing and truculent. "What's it now? Half-past two? Back just after three, I dare say." With his hand on the knob, he stopped, turned round and looked darkly at Ethel. "She's going to hear something from me, good or no good."

"Go on then, get it off your chest," she replied. "Perhaps you'll feel better after that." She gave the typewriter carriage a push so that it shot across and rang its little bell, a contemptuous, dismissing little bell.

All the way down the stairs, Mr. Ridvers told himself that Ethel was getting altogether too uppish and was not much use in the office any longer and not very much use anywhere else the way she was these days, and that it was always the same if you allowed yourself to have a bit of fun with them because the little bitches took advantage in a minute and it was time he stopped having these little games. The wind was very lively as he walked up Victoria Street, and he damned it heartily. It whistled round his legs, tried to snatch his hat, flung scraps of waste paper at him, and made him feel liverish again. At *The Crown* he found he had to stop at the bar and add two more whiskies, very quick ones, to the supply he had taken in during his early lunch; but they did not make his grievances seem any less or restore his lost temper.

II

The Crown is the oldest and most comfortable hotel in The Triangle, and Miss Trant had stayed on there because she liked the place and had been able to claim the small sitting-room upstairs for her own use. She was in there

now, talking to Inigo Jollifant, who had just had lunch with her. These two were now very good friends indeed, and Inigo had been giving her all the news of the troupe, for she had only just returned from a visit—the first since Autumn—to Hitherton. On the little table were a number of papers, rough accounts and letters, that she had been looking over during the morning.

"I don't know what to do," she was saying, raising her voice as the wind rattled the old window frames. "To tell you the truth, I haven't been able to think properly since I came back. I feel—do you know?—restless."

"My own feeling, absolutely," said Inigo. "It's the wind, I think—the wind on the heath, brother. Spring's on the way, that must be it."

"On the way!" she cried. "It's here."

"Not here," he corrected her gravely. "Not in Gatford. There may be a spot of it somewhere on the edge of Mundley or Stort. But tell it not in Gatford."

"Well, it may not be here, but it's everywhere else. You should see the flowers at Hitherton—already."

Inigo looked at her curiously. "Shall I tell you what I think? I think you're tired of it—not of us——"

"Certainly not of you," she interrupted. "None of you."

"No, not of us, as people, but of the business itself. I suspect you've had enough now."

Miss Trant laughed, quickly, nervously. "And I was thinking just the same about you all through lunch—the very same thing—that you were tired of it but would not admit it."

"The two ama-chewers, eh! Had enough!" He thought for a moment. "No, I can't say I've definitely felt that, not quite that." He hesitated.

"Suppose"—and she held him with a level glance—"Susie left us?" The instant look of horror on his expressive face brought a smile to her own. "There you are, you see," she cried, in friendly triumph.

"As a matter of fact," he remarked, serious now, "Susie herself is rather restless. And she doesn't seem to be particularly keen on this Bournemouth offer. None of the younger ones are, you know. Jerningham seems uneasy about it, and Elsie—who you would think would jump at it—doesn't seem very interested. As I told you, it's the old hands, Jimmy and the Joes and Mitcham, who are all for it and so worried because you won't decide at once. They think it's a marvellous offer, absolutely, and so it is from their point of view—resident season, guaranteed and all the rest of it. All their dreams come true."

"I know, poor dears. It's just what they've been wanting. There's no reason why we shouldn't accept it. After all, I needn't be there, not all the time, need I?"

"Not at all. You can take the whole summer off, if you like."

"But really I don't like. That's the trouble. Please don't tell the others this, will you? But somehow the idea of going there, just settling down in Bournemouth for nearly six months, doesn't appeal to *me,* and on the other hand, I don't just want to march off, though of course if they thought they could get on now without me, I could leave altogether."

"Oh, don't do that," cried Inigo, alarmed. "Besides, although we must be making money now—quite a lot, I imagine—you can't have got back all you've spent yet."

"No, I haven't," she admitted, with an involuntary glance at the papers on the table. "We're doing so wonderfully well here that there really is a good profit, so good that I feel like a bloated profiteer and capitalist, but actually I'm still about two hundred pounds to the bad. And the people who have taken my house at Hitherton now say that all kinds of things must be done to it—it's very old, you know, and has been rather neglected—and apparently I must do them and I shudder to think what it will cost."

"Well, there you are then. You must carry on and rake in the dibs, shekels, or boodle. We can't allow you to retire still losing on the show."

"I don't want to retire," she told him emphatically. "I should hate to. It's just that—well, like you—I feel restless and don't know what to do."

"I rather think that Jimmy and Mitcham and possibly Joe, the anxious lads, are downstairs in the bar, in the hope of getting the latest bulletin or ultimatum. I rather think so," Inigo concluded lightly.

"Oh dear!" Miss Trant stared at him. "I know they're dreadfully anxious about the Bournemouth business. Inigo, will you please slip down and tell them to wait a little longer because I may want to see them? I can't see them this minute though because I must make up my mind first. I hope waiting down there doesn't mean having a lot of drinks."

"It does," replied Inigo gravely. "Always. And more especially at a crisis, when the beverages come to hand almost mechanically. However, I'll slip down and tell them." He went out but almost immediately afterwards popped his head in the door. "A gent to see you," he announced. "Name of Ridvers and smell of whisky. Will you have a look at him?"

Miss Trant, surprised, said she would, and the next moment Inigo had gone and a heavy man, of a somewhat swollen and purplish cast of countenance, was standing in the doorway. His bowler hat was tilted towards the back of his head and he had a cigar in his mouth. He came in without removing either hat or cigar.

"I am Miss Trant," rising and regarding him with no great favour. "Do you want to see me?"

"That's it. My name's Ridvers, and I don't mind telling you I'm the Triangle New Era Cinema Company, *Un*limited. Well-known here, *very* well-known, *not* a stranger to the district." He paused, looked at her, then took out his cigar and looked at that, shooting a little cloud of smoke at his companion.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," said Miss Trant, stepping back from the smoke.

"You're Miss Trant who's running these what's it Companions, pierrot show, aren't you?" said Mr. Ridvers heavily.

"Yes. What do you want?" And she looked pointedly first at the hat, then at the cigar, then at the whole man.

But Mr. Ridvers was not to be hurried. His manner said very plainly that he had his own methods of approach to a topic. He pursed up his thick lips, stuck the cigar between them again, half-closed his eyes and wagged his head, and then growled through the cigar: "Doing damn well here, aren't you?"

"I beg your pardon?" Miss Trant looked at him in amazement.

"Not-at-all, not-at-all." He rested himself against the back of a high chair, took out his cigar, stared at her, and said again: "Doing damn well here, aren't you?"

Miss Trant still stared.

"And do you know"—and here Mr. Ridvers used his cigar as a pointer and contrived to spill some ash over the chair—"at whose expense you're doing so damn well? At mine. And I'm here to have a little talk about it."

"I don't want to have a talk about it," she cried.

"P'raps not. But I do." He made movements that suggested he was about to sit down.

This was too much for Miss Trant. "Will you please go away at once?" she suddenly blazed at him, much to his astonishment. "How dare you come in here behaving like this! I don't want to talk to you about anything." She turned her back on him and opened the window, instantly admitting a cold and disturbing rush of our old acquaintance, the March wind, which at once determined to try and choke Mr. Ridvers with his own cigar smoke.

He coughed, spluttered, and cursed. But he was really shocked, for he had his own code of manners and now they had been outraged.

"I hope you don't call yourself a lady," he exclaimed, in genuine indignation. "What's the idea? Going on like that!"

Miss Trant swept round, marched past him to the door

and threw it open. "Now will you please go?" she said, white with annoyance. "If you don't go, I will, and I shall ask the proprietor to turn you out of my room."

Mr. Ridvers advanced and looked closely at her for a moment. Then he gave his hat a tap to bring it forward, made a clicking noise, exclaimed "Well, my God!", and went click-clicking down the corridor. When he reached the bar again, he was in a very bad temper. Tom Ellis himself, the landlord, was there, talking to two strangers, a long thin oldish fellow in a ridiculous overcoat and a short man with a peering monkey face.

"Let's have another, Tom," said Mr. Ridvers gruffly. "I need it." Then, after swallowing half his whisky, he burst out with "That's a bitch of a woman you've got upstairs, Tom."

"Who's this you're talking about, Charlie?"

"Trant or whatever her name is," said Mr. Ridvers heartily. "Running a pierrot show here, till the sands are ready again, I suppose. Hello, what's the matter with you?" Tom was nodding and winking at him.

"These two gentlemen here," said Tom, whose business it was to keep in with everybody, "are members of that troupe. Very good show, they tell me."

"And let me tell you, sir," said the taller stranger, who is no stranger to us, being no other than Mr. Morton Mitcham, "that's no way to talk about a lady in public." And his eyebrows completed the rebuke.

"That is so," said his companion, Mr. Jimmy Nunn, sternly, and shutting one eye as he looked at Mr. Ridvers. "Just keep your bitches to yourself."

Mr. Ridvers gave a short laugh and cast a contemptuous eye over the rickety pair. "So this is what they're all paying their money to see, is it, Tom? Tut-t-t-t. Broken-down old pros. Buskers. I wish I'd known what they looked like when I saw that woman upstairs. She's not all there, Tom." He tapped his forehead. "You want to keep an eye on her. Pierrots! Tut-t-t-t."

"Who is this—er—gentleman?" And the irony Mr. Mitcham, raising his eyebrows to a monstrous height, threw into that last word was stunning.

"Now then, gentlemen," said Tom. "Let's be friendly. This is Mr. Ridvers who runs the cinemas round here."

"Ah!" said Mr. Mitcham significantly, looking at Mr. Nunn.

"Ah!" replied Mr. Nunn.

"What are you ah-ing about?" demanded Mr. Ridvers truculently.

"Do you remember that ninepence we threw away the other afternoon in that dirty little place, Nunn?" Mr. Mitcham inquired.

"And we wondered how people could pay money to go in," replied Jimmy. "Is that the place? And you thought it was raining in all the pictures, they were so old."

"And you were asking me how the management had the face to have that cracked old piano and a girl to play it who'd never had any lessons. That's the place, isn't it, Nunn? Yes, I thought so." He sighed deeply.

"You're very funny, aren't you?" said Mr. Ridvers, looking from one to the other very fiercely. "But don't think I'm going to take it from *you* because I'm not." He did not say from whom he would take it but there was a suggestion that he had taken it from somebody quite recently. "Couple of buskers! Going round with the hat! Dirty pierrots! Let me tell you this, the pair of you, and you can tell that——"

"Easy, Charlie, easy," said the landlord, who looked anything but easy himself.

"You want a good mouth-wash," cried Jimmy angrily to Mr. Ridvers. "It's asking for a good clean-out, that big mouth of yours."

"I've been in places where you'd have had a bullet through you—like that—zip!—for saying less than you've said about a lady." And Mr. Mitcham, drawing the Silver King round him with a noble gesture of scorn, attempted to wither the furious cinema proprietor with one magnificent glance.

"Go and have a look at yourselves," roared Mr. Ridvers, at the same time attempting to have a closer look at them himself, a movement that made them back a little, for Mr. Ridvers, with his heavy shoulders and great thrusting jowl, was at that moment a very formidable figure. "I'll say what I like, and you won't stop me and you know you won't. Do you see? I'll say what I like."

"That's the way, Mister," said a cheerful voice from behind them. "That's the way to talk. Let a man say what he likes, that's my motto—s'long as he doesn't hurt anybody. Morning, boys. Any news? Hello, what's up?"

"I'll tell you what's up, Joe," said Jimmy in tones that did not conceal his relief. And he plucked Joe by the elbow and in two whispered sentences told him what had happened.

The massive Joe then stepped forward and examined Mr. Ridvers curiously, as if there stood before him some new kind of creature.

"Well," said Mr. Ridvers, standing his ground but not looking as if he was certain of it, "what's wrong with you?"

"I'll tell you what's wrong with me," said Joe softly. "I'm a pierrot, same as these two. A dirty little pierrot. A broken-down pro. Just the same. Miss Trant, the lady upstairs, pays me my money. Just the same. Now I'll tell you what's the matter with you. You've two names. One's Mud and the other's Walker." He jerked an enormous thumb towards the door. "Off! Outside! You've just time. Oh!"—and here Joe wagged his head wistfully and a certain rapturous note crept into his voice—"I could give you such a slugging. You're just the right shape and size, you are."

Mr. Ridvers had reached this conclusion even before Joe announced it. He departed. He ought to have stopped when he reached the door, turned round, scowled at them all and produced the sinister laugh, the old hollow "Ha! Ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-*ha!*"; and indeed it is a pity he cannot be brought in every other page or so now to give us a warning "Ha! Ha!"; but the fact remains that he went without

a backward glance and in complete silence. He was, however, at boiling point, and a theatrical scowl, a little fist-shaking, and thirty seconds' sinister mirth, would have done him good. In Victoria Street the wind welcomed him boisterously as an old playmate, but his only response was to demand that it should first be damned and afterwards blasted. And when Ethel asked him if any good had come of his little talk, his reply was of such a nature that her typewriter was heard no more that day in the office of the Triangle New Era Cinema Company.

III

Mrs. Joe put down her cup, then cocked her head in order, it seemed, to give her full attention to the wind. "Just listen to that, my dear," she remarked complacently, rather as if she had shares in some company that manufactured March weather. "Wild, I call it. March came in like a lion and seems to be going on like one. That makes it all the nicer to be in here, doesn't it?"

Susie, who was sitting in an enormous chair, specially introduced into that room for the benefit of Joe, curled her legs underneath her and snuggled down. "Couldn't be nicer," she said lazily. "I love it when it's rotten outside and I'm not there and haven't to be there for an hour or two. It makes railway carriages cosier, even." And she rubbed her cheek against the side of the chair.

"When Joe went out to see if there was any news," Mrs. Joe continued, "I was saying to myself I could just do with a nice little chat. I must get my work." Having found a complicated and very untidy piece of knitting, bright pink in hue, she beamed across the hearth at her visitor, then settled herself in her chair, and looked cosy and confidential yet still majestic, like a queen off duty.

"Now this is really nice," she exclaimed. "You know, if only George was here and in rather better health than he was at Christmas—you remember he was not at all well then, though Clara says he is all right now—do you know what I should call myself?"

Susie from the depths of her chair replied that she didn't.

"Stop!" cried Mrs. Joe in a startling and dramatic fashion, at the same time, sitting bolt upright. "Stop! I've no right to ask for Everything. I don't say—I *won't* say—if only George was here. I'll say this. Do you know what I call myself *now?* I call myself—for once—a Happy Woman." She looked triumphantly at Susie and then looked severely at her knitting and shook it a little, just as if it was about to interrupt with some impudent remark.

"You like it here, don't you?" said Susie.

"To be quite honest with you, my dear, I do. It suits me," replied Mrs. Joe with decision, "down to the ground. I dare say I can do my share of grumbling. If Things aren't going well, I face the fact and ask others to do the same. When they do go well, I say so. Just now it would be a sin to grumble, it really would."

"But I'm not grumbling," Susie protested.

"Quite so. Here we are, nice and cosy together, having our little chat in front of a fire, a good fire, a most liberal fire I call it——"

"They're jolly good about fires round here, aren't they?"

"I can say that for mine, Mrs. Pennyfeather," cried Mrs. Joe with judicial enthusiasm. "She'd never stoop so low as to send in about four pieces and a shovelful of dust and call that a shilling scuttle. Most liberal in the matter of coal. Well, here we are, listening to the wind blowing outside and not caring about it at all, and knowing that tonight we'll have a good audience, an appreciative audience, out at Stundley or Gort or wherever it is we're playing this week. Yes, Mundley, of course. That's the one, isn't it—the one where the trams go all round the funny dirty statue in the middle—Mundley? I find these three towns terribly confusing, don't you? Though of course as Dates they couldn't be better. And then such unusually good rooms these are too, aren't they? Look at this one. Have you noticed the oil paintings?"

As nearly every bit of wall space was covered with brownish canvases, framed lavishly in gilt but mysterious and curiously cotton-woolly in their subjects, Susie could reply with truth that she had noticed the oil paintings. "I've been wondering for some time," she said, peeping out of her chair to have another glance round at them, "what they're about. They don't seem to be *about* anything much, do they?"

"The work of Mrs. Pennyfeather's uncle, I understand," said Mrs. Joe, whose tones now took on a certain new dignity, befitting the tenant of such a room and art gallery. "An amateur—he was a seedsman or ironmonger, I forget which—but very gifted and quite up to professional standard. Above it in some ways, I think."

"I must say, Mrs. Joe, they all look alike to me," said Susie. "Yet they don't seem to have any sort of subject—unless it's the inside of a mattress—you know, one of those brown woolly ones—he's been trying to paint."

"Moors and Glens, I believe, were his favourite subjects," said Mrs. Joe. "He seems to have been fond of Highland scenery, though Mrs. Pennyfeather tells me he was never up there. We once played Aberdeen and Inverness and saw just the same kind of scenery through the carriage window, in the train, you know, not quite so brown perhaps and not so many deers and stags about, but very like. You must admit, my dear, they give the room a Tone. It's a relief to me after so many calendars and photographs of Oddfellows and that class of thing. A woman who's gone to so much expense and trouble with a Home so rarely lets. Now where would you find a nicer room to sit in than this? As a matter of fact"—she dropped her voice—"I know they're still paying off on that chair you're sitting in and the oak table there and the bookcase behind you, she practically told me so, the other day. And you know how Joe is set on having a Home of Our Own—well, put him in that chair, let him take a look round this room, and you can't drag him away from the subject. 'Oh, for a Home of Our Own!' You should hear him go on about it.

Though I must say, things being as they are and our work what it is, how we should get a Home of Our Own and what we should do with it when we had got it, I *don't* know, and if he does, then he doesn't tell me. Men never *really* think at all, as you'll find out for yourself one of these days, my dear."

"I've done all the finding out about them I'm going to do," Susie announced very promptly.

"That I cannot believe," Mrs. Joe retorted, "or I should be sorry for you. But you must agree with me that if you're lucky with rooms, the next best thing to having a Home is playing a resident season. Now we've been lucky with the rooms here, and this is practically a resident season, isn't it?"

"Resident—with tram rides," replied Susie. "Though I usually go out to Mundley by bus."

"With Tram Rides or Bus, certainly," said Mrs. Joe quite solemnly. "But staying on in the same rooms makes it resident, I think, dear. Though of course compared with a whole summer season at Bournemouth, this is nothing. When I heard of that offer," she continued, more animated now, "the moment I heard of it, Susie, I said to Joe 'The Luck has completely changed. We're Made.' And he agreed, though he says Bournemouth's not quite his style. Which is ridiculous of course but you know how Joe will pretend to be so rough and ready. 'A big town,' I told him. 'A town with Tone and Taste—and Money of course. Five months at least guaranteed. It's a Miracle.' If you'd gone round the coast and told me you were trying to find a place for a resident season, I should have told you without the slightest hesitation—'Bournemouth, by all means,' I should have said at once. And Bournemouth now it is. But nothing so far seems to have been done about it, nothing. I hope there's no haggling about terms. Now that we are getting on, we mustn't be greedy. Surely the Bournemouth people wouldn't haggle?"

"The terms are quite good," said Susie indifferently.

"Then they should be wired—at once."

"Yes, I suppose so," Susie continued, staring into the fire. "I suppose we ought to think ourselves lucky."

"Undoubtedly. Remember Rawsley, where Miss Trant found us," said Mrs. Joe earnestly. "Bear that horrible place in mind, my dear."

"I know. Only six months ago too. Oh, I've thought about all that." Susie shook herself out of the chair, leaned her elbows on the mantelpiece, and tapped the fender with one foot. "Yes, it's a marvellous offer—a plum—the sort that C. P. people are always telling you they're getting and somehow weren't able to accept—the liars! But—I feel a bit of a pig about this—but"—she wheeled round swiftly, facing her companion—"oh, Mrs. Joe, I don't—I really, honestly don't—want to spend the whole summer in C. P. work at Bournemouth——"

"Just what I said to Joe about you," the other cried in mournful triumph. "'Susie doesn't want to,' I told him. I saw it at once. He didn't of course, but then he never notices anything, never. Now why don't you? Tell me."

Susie moved her shoulders impatiently and pouted down at the fire. "Everybody's beginning to tell me I'm restless, and it's true, I am. The weather, I suppose—bit of nerves—swelled head, if you like. I've had too many good audiences this year, all of a sudden—not good for the little girl. Now she doesn't know when she's well off." She laughed, rather bitterly.

Mrs. Joe was maternal. "Now don't be foolish, Susie. Nobody is saying anything about you."

"I wouldn't care if they were," cried Susie wildly. "It isn't that. I suppose I'm always thinking something absolutely marvellous is going to turn up, and then when you all come along and say 'Hooray! Six months in Bournemouth! Susie will continue to sing Number Twenty-seven on the programme! Twice daily! Outside in the afternoon, but if wet in the shelter! Bring the children!' then I see the same old stick-in-the-mud business going on and on, and I think—oh hell!"

"Not hell!" cried Mrs. Joe reproachfully.

"Yes—*Hell!*" Susie repeated, ready now either to laugh or to cry. "I just see myself stuck there. With those three numbers of Inigo's, I could go anywhere, anywhere. They're too good for concert party audiences."

"Not too good," said Mrs. Joe, "but in a different style perhaps."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean too good really, but not what they want. Anyhow——" She stopped suddenly. "Oh, I am a fool. I'd forgotten what I slipped in to tell you. About Coral Crawford. Now this is what gets my goat, and you can't blame me. I brought the paper and put it down somewhere. Here we are. Now," she went on sternly, "you remember Coral Crawford, don't you? She was with the *Larks and Owls* Company with you, and left just after I joined, didn't she?"

"I should think I do remember her. Coral Crawford. One of the most outrageous Borrowers I ever shared a dressing-room with."

"Well then," cried Susie, "what did you think of her, honestly?"

Mrs. Joe replied as if she were giving a reference: "As a turn, hopeless. As a companion, a fellow performer, a lady, no better, being deceitful, untrustworthy, given to lying, to say nothing of borrowing everything that could possibly be borrowed and some things that a self-respecting girl would never dream of wanting from anybody else, and never returning anything without being asked times without number." She leaned back and added: "What about her?"

"You remember she said she was fed up with C. P. work and left us to try and get into the chorus?" said Susie breathlessly. "She got in. I've never heard of her since—until this morning. Now read this." And she stuck the folded newspaper under her companion's nose. "Starring—*starring*, mind you—in a new show at the Pall Mall! Doesn't it make you want to scream? Coral Crawford! Read it. Playing with Tommy Mawson and Leslie Wate and Virginia Washington! Great success! Should run for

ever! Look what they say about the show! Coral Crawford! Bang at the top! I'm not jealous, honestly I'm not —it's nice seeing people you know getting there—but that girl—a star at the Pall Mall already! Help! When I read that this morning in bed I could feel myself going hot and cold and pink and yellow all at once. I wanted to gnaw the sheets and blankets, I really did."

"Well, well!" Mrs. Joe still stared at the paper. "Of course the girl may have improved a lot since we knew her. I've known it happen in the most surprising way," she said dubiously.

"Och—tripe! Not possible. Improved! She'd nothing to improve. There wasn't anything there. Anyhow, there she is—Coral Crawford—Crawly—at the Pall Mall, and here I am, taking the tram out to Mundley every night to sing Number Thirty-three on the programme! Isn't it enough to make you sick? And then you talk to me about six months in Bournemouth, jogging on through the same old show! I know—I know—I oughtn't to grumble—I'm *not* grumbling. Miss Trant's an angel—you're all angels —and I suppose I ought to shut up. But there you are. And *now* do you understand?"

"You think this isn't good enough for you?" said Mrs. Joe softly, staring at the fire.

"I don't mean exactly that." Susie was penitent. "I don't, really."

"Yes, you do," the other replied, quite gently. Her hands were still now, resting idly on her knitting, that knitting which might go on and on, from town to town, and be taken into dressing-rooms and railway carriages and all manner of strange lodgings, and grow more and more complicated and shapeless and useless until at last it would disappear and never be heard of again. "And you're right," she added, in quite a different tone of voice. "You are too good, Susie. I used to think I was." This was slipped in wistfully.

"And so you are," said Susie stoutly. "Miles and miles."

"Do you think so, really?" cried Mrs. Joe, brightening at once. "Well of course when I'm in voice, there's no doubt I am. It's the delicacy of my voice that kept me out of big work. And after all, good training and long experience, Taste and Interpretation—they must count for something, mustn't they?"

"Course they must, you absurd thing!"

"What you want, what you're pining for, Susie, is a big Chance. That's why you're restless. I know, my dear. Well, keep on quietly, doing your best, and it'll come, that's what I say. I don't say *how* or *where* it'll come because I don't know, but come it will. I feel it. And you're still very young, aren't you?"

"I suppose so," said Susie gloomily, "though at times I feel a thousand, I can tell you. And telling yourself how young you are doesn't seem to make much difference if you're not satisfied. Every time I hear about anybody in the profession suddenly doing so marvellously, like Crawly, I always try and find out their ages. So does Jerry, I discovered the other day. He's pretty poisonous, of course, but he does understand about things like that. Jerry'll get there soon, if it kills him."

"Your Chance might arrive," said Mrs. Joe, "at Bournemouth. That wouldn't surprise *me*."

"It would me. Unless you mean six nights at the local Picture Palace. Bournemouth! Pooh!"

"Again, it might arrive here," Mrs. Joe went on impressively, "in Gatford—or even Gort—I mean Stort, or Mundley. Yes, you can laugh, my dear, but I say it *might*. I've known it happen before and in far worse places, far, far worse—in Sheer Holes."

"All right then, it might," said Susie in tones that suggested the maximum of possible unbelief. "Let's talk about something a bit more cheerful or I shall weep. Would you like the latest about Elsie and her Pink Egg?"

"Her what?" Mrs. Joe was startled.

"Well, he looks exactly like one. You've seen him, haven't you?—the great gentleman friend. She thinks about

nothing else now. Sees him every day, nearly. D'you know what she's gone and done?—bought a new winter coat—*now!* When he first popped up with his little car, she rushed off and bought a new jumper suit. You've seen it? Well, she tried going out with him in that and of course she was frozen stiff every time, leaving her old coat at home. So the other day she rushed round the shops and bought a new coat. And now she's so broke, broke to the world, she'll never have a thing for summer. And all for Mr. Herbert—otherwise Bert—Dulver, otherwise Pink Egg."

"I wondered," mused Mrs. Joe. "That's why she's not bothering about future dates."

"Can't think of anything but Egg or Pink Un."

"It sounds to me like Touch-and-Go. She never had her heart in the Profession. Do you think she'll manage it this time?"

"She hasn't said much," replied Susie, "but it looks to me as if she's hoping to bring him to the boil."

"He's no Egg, my dear, if she can't," said Mrs. Joe, majestically coy.

"But what a life if she does!" cried Susie. "I ask you! Mrs. Pink Egg! Just imagine—all your hopes on that! Horrors! I'd rather keep on, going round to fifty Rawsleys, or having a resident season at Tewborough——"

Mrs. Joe shuddered. "Don't mention that Hole, please, my dear. Even to joke about it."

"Yes, at Tewborough with a sniffy cold that never stops than be like poor Elsie. When I think of her Pink Egging it for all she's worth, I swear I won't ever grumble or feel so restless again."

"Very nice," said Mrs. Joe, "but you will."

And of course she did.

IV

No one knew better than Miss Elsie Longstaff herself that, at that very moment, it was touch and go with the gentleman who has been somewhat unfairly introduced to us as Pink Egg. Mr. Herbert Dulver was a gentleman friend

of some two years' standing, though for the greater part of that time he had occupied a lowly place in the hierarchy of Elsie's gentlemen friends. Indeed, there had been periods when he had been as completely out of mind as he was out of sight. Shortly after *The Good Companions* had arrived at The Triangle, however, Mr. Dulver had turned up again, for he was managing an hotel owned by his father, a substantial old place about fifteen miles out of Gatford and on the main London road. All the Dulvers—large, pink and brassily cheerful persons—were landlords or bookmakers or something convivial or sporting. Herbert had been managing an hotel at the seaside when Elsie had first made his acquaintance, and now, having acquired in a mysterious Dulverish manner a considerable sum of money, he proposed not only to manage but also to own another seaside hotel. He was a bachelor about forty who liked to clothe his pink plumpness in sporting tweeds, wore a fair clipped moustache, and looked at the world out of prominent light-blue eyes that had about them a kind of hard amiability. His manner and phraseology suggested the confidential, but his voice was loud and carried far and he made full use of it, so that he always gave the odd impression that he was bellowing out his innermost secrets. Actually, however, he had no difficulty in keeping to himself whatever was best known only to himself, and was in reality a far more astute man of business than he appeared to be, like all the Dulvers, who for several generations now had been ordering drinks all round and slapping everybody on the back and talking at the top of their voices while they quietly contrived to feather their nests. And this Mr. Dulver had the traditional attitude towards women. Outside business, in which he demanded and took care to receive his money's worth, he was very chivalrous and gallant towards "the Ladies," and both masterful and saucy with "the Girls." Elsie, who liked being one of the Ladies and one of the Girls too, understood and appreciated both these attitudes, but that did not prevent her from telling herself from the first that Mr. Dulver would want watching. Not

that this stood in his way at all, for in her heart of hearts Elsie admired a man who wanted watching.

Mr. Dulver had run her out in his little car to the hotel for lunch, and now they had stopped on the way back, at a spot on the side of the road where a mound of hill and a little copse sheltered them from the tearing wind. There they lit their cigarettes and Elsie waited expectantly. She knew only too well that Mr. Dulver had news for her and that this afternoon might decide everything. Miles of soft Midland landscape, brown fields, the glitter of water, the swirl of smoke, the grey distance, were spread before them, but she had no eyes for it all, for the real world had narrowed to those few square inches, pinker than ever, that represented the outward map of Mr. Dulver's mind and where there might soon be seen the signals of victory or defeat.

"Well," she cried, turning to look him full in the face and pouting a little, "aren't you going to tell me? I've been thinking about how you were getting on down there all the week-end. Course, if you don't want to tell, it doesn't matter. I just wondered, that's all." Elsie was cleared for action. Every sentence now would be a well-aimed shot from a different turret.

"I was waiting," replied Mr. Dulver. "Didn't want to say anything in there. Between you and me, I'm thinking of taking it."

"You are?" she exclaimed in glad surprise, very much the bright, friendly, interested woman. "I'm glad, Bert; I really am." Were her eyes shining, or were they just staring, bulging out, silly?

Bert looked pleased and important. "It's a good little house, twenty bedrooms—might easily put in a few more, make an annexe, easy. Good smoke-room and bar trade too, though it wants working up a bit. Summer's money for dust, of course, but fair number staying in winter, specially week-ends. Golf, y'know, and fishing. Bang opposite the pier too——"

"Opposite the pier!" cried Elsie reproachfully. "Don't

I know it is? Haven't I played Eastbeach, year before last, and on that very pier? What's the good of telling you anything, Bert? You never listen." And she gave him a companionable tap.

"That's right," he said apologetically. "I'm that full of it, I'm forgetting you've been there, Elsie. Well, they want four thousand, lock, stock, and barrel, except the usual take-overs. As I say, it wants working up, mind you."

"You could do that all right," she told him.

"I could eat it," he proclaimed. "I tell you, I like the look of it, like the town too. Not far from London, either. Good road. Run up now and again and see what's doing." He clicked his tongue appreciatively and looked doggish.

"You would!" cried Elsie, who knew her cues. "You leave London alone. Time you behaved yourself, if you ask me."

"Something in that," he admitted, "though we've all got to have a bit o' fun, haven't we?"

"That's what I always tell them. We're a long time dead, I say."

He looked at her admiringly and the arm resting on the back of the seat behind her came a little closer. "You know what's what and you've been to Eastbeach," he said. "Honestly now, what d'you think of it, Elsie?"

"You don't want to know what I think of it."

"Don't I? Well, what am I asking you for? Brought you out here to hear what you think about it. Come on, Elsie, let's have it, straight from the horse's mouth."

"Who you calling a horse!"

"Not you." The arm was resting on her shoulders now. The little moustache came nearer. There was a kind of mistiness about Mr. Dulver as he gazed at this fair ripeness, which was exactly his taste in feminine charm.

Elsie averted the kiss that she knew would inevitably have descended upon her a moment later, but she did it easily and quietly by drawing away ever so little and suddenly looking serious, business-like. "Well, I'll tell you

what I think about it, Bert, if you'll only be sensible for a minute," she began; and thereupon told him why she approved of Eastbeach and the hotel there, showing him quite plainly, if he only had the sense to see it, that she was a girl with her wits about her who knew what the hotel business was, even if she did happen to be on the stage. And all the time her imagination, dizzy as it was, still explored the possibility. She saw herself in that hotel, Mrs. Dulver, telling the maids what to do; queening it for half an hour now and again in the saloon bar, hair always waved and good clothes; shopping in style—"Good morning, Madam"; recognised by all the gentlemen in the town—"Good afternoon, Mrs. Dulver"—raising their hats; having a word with the girls who came to the pier pavilion—not stand-offish or rubbing it in but still—pitying them; taking little trips to London with Bert in the car—a bigger one by this time; going round the shops and doing a show—"used to be in the Profession myself, once, my dear"; the whole rich future. And a word or two could make it hers. "Of course you know better than I do, Bert—a girl isn't much of a judge of these things, though I know a bit more than most—but that's my honest opinion. You go in and buy the place."

"Going to," said Mr. Dulver complacently. "Decided that first thing this morning, matter of fact, but just wanted to hear what you thought about it. And I'll tell you what it is, Elsie, old kid——"

"Old kid! What next!"

"You've got it where it's wanted," he continued, tapping his forehead. "Used to think you'd just got the looks and style and nothing else to it——"

"Thank you, sir, she said," cried Elsie. "Very good of you to admit the looks, I must say, *Mister* Dulver." But she smiled at him very sweetly.

The arm tightened round her and the now amorous Bert tried to kiss her. To his surprise, however, for he had kissed her before, she repulsed him, firmly if gently. "Hello! Hel-low!" He drew back and looked at her.

"We aren't very matey to-day, are we? What have I done wrong?"

Knowing very well that the slightest chill would ruin all and yet realising that now or never was the time when he must not have his own way too easily, Elsie felt as if she was walking on a tight-rope. She smiled again; a little one this time, a bit mysterious. "You never do anything wrong, do you?" she remarked lightly. "But there isn't anything wrong. Honestly, there isn't. I'm enjoying myself. Aren't you?" And she looked at him archly.

"Not sure about that," Mr. Dulver muttered, not so certain of himself and everything else as he had been a few minutes before. "Here, though"—and the arm tightened again—"what about——"

"Going home?" she put in quickly. It was a terrible risk. If he said—and she could almost hear him saying it already, in a flash—"All right, let's go home then," then it was all over. Awful!

"I'm going to say something to you," said Bert, severely and importantly. Bless him!—it didn't matter now how severe and important he liked to sound. "Have you ever thought," he continued with great deliberation, "of abandoning your stage career? Wait a minute. I mean, to get married."

"Oh, I've been proposed to a good few times, I don't mind telling you," cried Elsie, who didn't mind telling him.

"No doubt. Suppose you were asked now, though?"

"Depends on who did the asking."

"I'm doing the asking."

"You try me."

"Go on then. What d'you say? Coming to Eastbeach as Mrs. Dulver of the *Black Horse?*"

"Oh, Bert——! Are you sure——?"

"Shouldn't be asking if I wasn't."

Then Mr. Dulver found himself being kissed. Into that kiss went a whole captured ecstatic vision of the future and a glorious farewell to cheap lodgings, bad meals, old

clothes, cramped dressing-rooms, bored audiences, and long Sundays in the train; and it took his breath away, almost frightened him. But not for long. Bert was delighted. He may have been a Dulver—with something hard, brassy, behind those curving pink cheeks and prominent light-blue eyes—but nevertheless he was a member of the sentimental sex, and now he moaned over her like any lovesick lad. He must be in the Eastbeach hotel before the season began, and they must be married before he went to Eastbeach, even if it would be a rush. To all of this Elsie gave an instant and rapturous assent.

Then her mind went racing through all the possibilities and complications. "But look here, Bert," she said, looking very solemn, "if it's going to be as soon as all that, it'll be awkward."

"Not it," he replied masterfully, holding her tight. "You leave it to me. I'll fix it. We're used to these things in the hotel business."

"That's all right, but"—she was genuinely troubled now—"well, I've nothing ready, and—oh, you might as well know—I'm completely broke, will be for weeks."

"Nothing in that. I knew you couldn't have much, from what you said. I'll fix that too—stand all the exes. You tell me what you want. Might as well do it properly while we're at it, what d'you say?"

What could she say—what were mere words—when she saw him shining there like a god? But when the car was headed for Gatford again, she never stopped talking and he listened with a proud air of proprietorship. At Mohen's, the large jewellers' in Victoria Street, he pulled up, saying "This is where you get the ring. Got to have a ring." Seeing that their marriage was to take place almost at once, other men might have thought an engagement-ring unnecessary, but that was not the Dulvers' way; what there was to be done had to be done—in style. You never saw any Mrs. Dulver without her full complement of rings. And Elsie, who was undoubtedly a born Mrs. Dulver, admired her Bert all the more for this grand decision. "You'll

have to come in," he told her, "to see what you fancy and try 'em on."

"You go first, Bert," she replied. "Have a look round." She had no idea what he would care "to run to" in this matter of rings.

He disappeared into the shop, and she remained in the car for a moment, then got out, looking at the passers-by with the assured stare of an engaged woman.

"Eh, I've been looking for you," said a familiar voice.

"Mr. Oakroyd!" She smiled upon him. She even smiled upon his companion, a thick-set, bow-legged man, who wore an immense green cap.

"Ay," said Mr. Oakroyd. "Miss Trant wants you to bring that there red dress wi' thingumbobs on—you knaw which it is—round to t'the-ater to-night."

"All right," replied Elsie indifferently. She had almost forgotten the existence of Miss Trant, the dress, and the theatre. "You won't see me in that much longer, Mr. Oakroyd. I'm giving Miss Trant my notice to-night. I'm getting married—quite soon."

"Nay, you don't say!" cried Mr. Oakroyd. "Well, well! I did hear you were doing a bit o' courting in t'district. I've seen him, haven't I? It's t'chap as comes round for you, him i' t'light suits as keeps pub somewhere, isn't it?"

The chap himself put in an appearance at that very moment. "Bert," cried Elsie, "this is Mr. Oakroyd, our props man. I've just been telling him."

"Hope to see you at the wedding, Mr. Oakroyd, drinking our health," cried Mr. Dulver affably.

"Good enough! I'll be there," Mr. Oakroyd replied. "This a friend o' mine," he added, rather proudly, indicating the thick-set, bow-legged, green-capped one. "Mr. Jock Campbell."

"Hello! Know that name! Seen you before!" said Mr. Dulver, who was very much at home in a situation of this kind. "Saw you last Saturday."

"That's right," replied Mr. Oakroyd, who appeared to think it was his duty to answer for his friend, apparently a very taciturn man. "'Gainst Lincoln City here."

"And played a good game too. If the forwards had only been as good as you backs," Mr. Dulver observed, "the Triangle would have walked away with it. But your forward line's weak, in *my* opinion."

Mr. Campbell, after swaying uneasily, now cleared his throat, preparatory to bursting into speech. "Och!" he muttered, "they're raw."

"He means they're nobbut young lads, new to t'game," his interpreter explained. "Don't you, Jock?"

"That's about it," said Mr. Dulver heartily. "Well, pleased to have met you. Come in, Elsie. I bet you don't know what we're doing. Choosing the ring." And he burst into a loud guffaw, which was answered by companionable if faintly sardonic grins from Messrs. Oakroyd and Campbell, who both did something rather vague to their caps and then moved away.

When Mr. Oakroyd had discovered that he was lodging in the very same street as, indeed, next door but one to, the famous Jock Campbell, now left back and captain of the recently formed Triangle United A. F. C., and formerly of Glasgow Celtic, Sheffield Wednesday—and Bruddersford United, he was very excited. Had he not spent many and many a happy Saturday afternoon at the Bruddersford ground cheering Jock's vast and miraculous clearance kicks? But when he also discovered that the great man was not only close at hand but was quite ready to make the acquaintance of an old admirer, to smoke a pipe with him and take turns about at paying for half-pints, Mr. Oakroyd's excitement and gratification knew no bounds. Jock was forty now, and so a veteran, an ancient of days, among professional footballers; on the field he looked old, if only because he had met so many footballs with his head that he was almost completely bald in front; he was heavy and he was slow; but he was an unusually powerful man and his long experience, his guile, enabled him to play a good game even yet, so that though his best days, when

fifty thousand spectators roared their approval at him, were over long ago, he was still an acquisition to such a junior club as the Triangle United. He had not been at Gatford long and was not a man to make friends easily, and it was not really surprising that he should take pleasure in Mr. Oakroyd's company. They had a common theme in Bruddersford, where Jock had lived several years; they were both separated from their wives; and they both had a decided taste for football and tobacco and beer and a deep philosophical interest in the chances and changes of this life, though the older of the two, Mr. Oakroyd, was the more eager and romantic. Such idealism as Mr. Campbell had centred about public houses: his one ambition now was to do what so many of his successful fellow gladiators had done, to find a nice little public house, not too far from a football ground, and turn himself into the landlord of it. A good benefit match might do it. For the rest, he was a man of vast but comfortable silences. Mr. Oakroyd, as we know, could hardly be called loquacious, but compared with his new friend he was a chatterbox.

"Yon's pleased wi' hersen nar," Mr. Oakroyd shouted, as they continued their walk down Victoria Street. He had to shout because the wind was making such a din. "She's bin fair sick to get hersen off this long time—and nar she's gone an' roped him in. An' it'll just suit her lahdidahing it a bit i' t'saloon bar wi' all her best clothes on and her hair all frizzed up."

"Ay," said Mr. Campbell.

"Not a bad sort o' chap she's gotten hold of," Mr. Oakroyd continued. "Right landlord style, did you notice?"

"Ay," said Mr. Campbell. And then, two minutes afterwards he muttered something that Mr. Oakroyd, who was now very clever at this kind of thing, interpreted to mean that, in Mr. Campbell's opinion, Mr. Dulver was obviously in a big way of business and was not a man to serve pints himself.

They turned out of the main street into a quieter thoroughfare. Here Mr. Oakroyd chuckled. "Pink Egg!

That's what Soosie—young lass o' troupe—calls him," he explained, "and if you nobbut tak a good look at him he's a bit like one, more still wi' his 'at off. Pink Egg! Eh, she's droll."

This shocked Mr. Campbell into speech. "It's no name that, man, to gie a landlord in a big way o' business," he said solemnly.

Mr. Oakroyd, well acquainted with his companion's great desire and respecting such an ambition, one for heroes, made no reply, and they covered the next two hundred yards or so in silence.

"Hoo's the lass that's awa'?" Mr. Campbell suddenly inquired. He had heard all about Lily in Canada.

"Nay, I haven't heard for a bit, not sin' I were telling yer," replied Mr. Oakroyd. "Seemingly she's doing champion. Allus says so. But I'd like to see for mysen," he added, a trifle wistfully.

"Ay," said Mr. Campbell. And then, growing reckless as a conversationalist, he said: "An' the wife? Hoo's she?"

"I can't get to know owt. Neither she nor t'lad'll say. I wrote nobbut t'other day an' asked 'em right aht if she were poorly an' if I could do owt. Eh, it's damn silly going on like that! But it's my wife all ower."

"They gae their ain gate," Mr. Campbell brought out from the depths of his own experience.

Nothing more was said until they reached Crimean Road, where they both lodged, and then Mr. Oakroyd, who had been looking vaguely troubled, returned to the subject of Elsie and her marriage. "That's one going o' t'owd lot," he said, as if *The Good Companions* had been together for six years instead of six months. "Nar it's started, mark my word. Elsie's nobbut t'first. More to foller, or I'm a Dutchman! Happen you've noticed it yersen, Jock? Nowt changes at all for some time, and then —all of a sudden, afore you knaw where you are—they're going right and left, and it's all to bits."

"Maybe," Mr. Campbell ventured.

"I'm down o' this, I am an' all," Mr. Oakroyd went on.

"I mun hear what t'others has to say. There's been a summat i' t'air these two-three week."

"Ay, a sicht too much wind," replied Mr. Campbell gravely. And we will allow him to have the last word—for once in his life.

CHAPTER II

A CHAPTER OF ENCOUNTERS

I

Elsie finished with the show on the last Saturday at Mundley, when she had been given a most successful Benefit Night, concluding with genuine tears and bouquets. Jimmy had already slipped down to Birmingham to interview and book her successor, Miss Mamie Potter. This first week of their return to the Gatford Hippodrome was going to be exciting. The new soubrette was due to arrive on Monday morning, to rehearse in the afternoon, to appear at night. Then on Wednesday there was Elsie's wedding, which was to be celebrated out at the Dulvers' hotel on the London Road. They were all going and the bus had already been ordered. Then on Saturday there was to be another Grand Benefit Night—you could see the bills plastered all over the town—this time for Miss Susie Dean, our popular comedienne. Next Saturday was Susie's twenty-first birthday. And she was giving a tea party first, and there was to be some sort of jollification, only vaguely outlined as yet, after the show. Moreover, the Hippodrome would be packed out every night, as they all knew, with enthusiastic Gatfordians. Here was excitement enough for hard-working professionals. What a week!

Yet all was not well with them. The older members of the troupe, Jimmy and Mitcham and the Brundits, were still quietly in despair about the Bournemouth offer, not yet accepted. Miss Trant seemed so dreamy and remote these days that she was considered unapproachable for the time being. It was very odd, but there it was. Business was never better, and, on the other hand, nothing bolder had been attempted for years in the C. P. world than Miss Trant's present venture, the renting of the Hippodrome, on stiff terms, with some nasty clauses slipped in; and yet—so fantastic is the sex, as Jimmy and Mr. Mitcham pointed out to one another—she did not seem to be bothering her head about it at all. But then all the young people were rather queer. Jerry Jerningham was more aloof and mysterious than usual, and was thought to be up to something, though nobody knew what. In spite of birthday and benefit—or because of them—Susie was still restless, rather snappy at times, and given to wriggling her pretty shoulders at people who asked the simplest and friendliest questions. She had snubbed poor Inigo so often lately that now he kept out of her way, stalked about with a new and purposeful air, and was understood to be hard at work revising the eight numbers he had written for them, which he called his *Tripe à la mode de Jazz*—to the entire mystification of his friend, Mr. Oakroyd. Success had come at last, but all these young people seemed to be taking it the wrong way, which proved conclusively to Mr. Mitcham that young people were not what they were when he had been a young person.

Mr. Oakroyd was mystified by many things these days. He was as interested as any of the others in the events of the near future. In his own fashion he shared any excitement that was going. Nevertheless, he found himself brooding somewhat darkly on Canada and 51, Ogden Street and the destiny of *The Good Companions*. He had never been very fond of Elsie, but she was "one o' t'owd lot," and the fact that she was going and another taking her place troubled him more than it did any of the others. Perhaps he alone, from out of the depths of his philosophy of Sudden Change, felt that this coming week would take them all much further than they ever imagined, that the exciting plans they had made for it were nothing compared with some other plans already being laid down for them by the old powers, the conspiracy of the wind and the

stars. The thread we saw dangling before him—so long ago, it seems!—as he walked up Manchester Road, Bruddersford, after the match, that thread, its colour changing, deepening, is now running faster and faster; and perhaps he has heard—in a dream, through some *Old Salt* reverie—the rattle of its winding spool.

The first thing that happened, of course, was Miss Mamie Potter. Jimmy had said that she was young but experienced, had no voice to speak of but danced really well, and would do. When pressed more closely, he always pointed out that people who were in a hurry could not pick and choose as long as they liked, and that for his part he did not pretend to be able to work miracles. There was thought to be something queer, fishy, about this. The arrival, the rehearsal, the appearance on the stage, of Miss Potter soon settled the question. Jimmy had no good solid reason for not engaging her, and so he had engaged her, but some instinct must have warned him that all was not well. On the stage she was adequate enough; as a matter of fact she was better than Elsie had ever been. But off the stage, Miss Mamie Potter was insufferable. Within less than twelve hours of her first arrival at Gatford station, she had put all their backs up; and it was clear that she was indeed a born putter-up of backs.

Miss Potter had a sleek, almost electro-plated, blonde head; no eyebrows; very round blue eyes; a button of a nose, so small and heavily powdered that it resembled the chalked end of a billiard cue; and a mouth that was a perpetual crimson circle of faint astonishment. The upper half of her, her neck and shoulders and the thin arms ending so curiously in little dumpy hands, was poor; but her legs were really beautiful. It was as if she were being carried about by two fine sonnets. Those two exquisite, twinkling, silky calves of hers seemed to be always making charmingly witty and impudent comments on the world. If she had never done anything but walk a little way in front of depressed males, she would have been a notable public benefactor, distributing a sense of the joy of life.

Unfortunately, she talked; and she talked in a kind of idle, staring voice, and the result was havoc. Her perpetual opening "I say" was very soon a storm signal.

"I say," she said to Mr. Oakroyd, after she had known him about quarter of an hour, "you seem to get a lot of your own way here, don't you? You're only the props, aren't you?" Mr. Oakroyd regarded her with astonishment and rubbed his chin hard. "Ay, that's all," he replied finally. "Nobbut a sort o' dog like. Just let me knaw if you hear me speaking out o' my turn. You mun just set us right as you go on. We knaw nowt." This speech might have puzzled and possibly quietened some people, but Miss Potter merely gave it a little condescending nod and then strolled away. "I say," she said to the horrified Morton Mitcham, "some of those card tricks of yours are pretty ancient, aren't they?" Equally ancient, in her opinion, were Jimmy's gags and Mrs. Joe's ballads. "I say," she remarked to Susie, "you seem to go down here very well, but they're letting you dig an awfully big hole in the programme, aren't they?" This was after the show on Monday night. It had been a rather queer performance. The house was crowded and as generally enthusiastic as ever, but from somewhere at the back of the pit (which was the cheapest part of the house, there being no gallery at the Hippodrome) there had come, at odd times, various loud jeers and hootings and cat-calls, obviously resented by most people in the audience, though now and then raising a laugh. This had never happened before, and they were all talking about it after the show. The furious Susie told Mrs. Joe that it must be Mamie Potter, but this did not satisfy Mrs. Joe or anybody else, not even Susie herself.

On Tuesday morning, the wind had dropped to a mild breeze and a little watery sunshine crept over the Midlands. Miss Trant, still unsettled by her visit to Hitherton, still haunted by the daffodils and the bursting crocuses of the Cottage garden, decided that she must have some light and air, and so took Susie and some sandwiches for a run in the car.

"It's heavenly to see the country again," cried Miss Trant, when they had left the car factories and the Triangle trams a long way behind. "I wish you could stay with me at Hitherton, some time, Susie. Do you think you would like the country?"

"Oh, I adore the country," cried Susie in her turn. She had imagined herself saying that, more than once, in interviews. She asked for nothing better, she always told the imaginary journalist, a young man, very nice, very respectful, than to retire to her little country place—just a cottage where she could do everything for herself (see photograph). But what she did not know, that morning, was that very soon, sooner than she expected, she really would be giving those interviews. "I've never seen enough of it," she went on, "because I've spent nearly every bit of my time in towns—usually awful holes. If the country only had theatres and shops and people, it would be perfect, wouldn't it?"

Miss Trant laughed, then took the car into the side of the road, and stopped. "We can eat our sandwiches here, don't you think?"

Susie sniffed the air appreciatively. "It feels quite strong, doesn't it?—the air, I mean. It's so funny not to get it second-hand, used up a bit. I've been brought up on that kind, and this sort makes me feel a bit tight. Really, it does. I want to giggle." She skipped out of the car and pirouetted a little on the shining grass. Then she looked down ruefully. "Jolly wet, though. That's the nuisance about the country, though, isn't it? It's so wet and muddy. When it does dry up, it suddenly gets dusty then, and if you go a walk you're absolutely choked and too thirsty to speak and your shoes are too tight all of a sudden."

They ate sandwiches. "I wonder what the very superior Miss Potter thinks about us all this morning," Miss Trant remarked. "You don't like her, do you?"

"Like her!" cried Susie. "She made me feel like murder last night. She did everybody. And as for thinking this morning, she won't have started yet. I know. She'll

be just getting up now, wiping the cold cream off her face. Honestly, she's poisonous. She'll have us all quarrelling like mad within a week. They always do, that kind. You just watch. Jimmy ought to have known, even if he was in a hurry and she sounded all right. A woman would have spotted what she was right off."

"Perhaps she'll improve in a day or two," said Miss Trant, rather indifferently. "I must admit she was rather terrible yesterday."

"Did she say anything to you?" Susie inquired. "I'll bet she did."

"Oh yes. I wasn't left out, I assure you, Susie. She strolled up to me and said: 'I say, I don't quite see why you're doing this, you know. This isn't your line at all, is it?'"

"She would! The cheek! How that girl's come to live so long beats me." Having relieved her feelings, Susie grew thoughtful, stole a glance or two at her companion, then said, finally: "But it isn't your line, is it?"

"I never said it was," Miss Trant replied.

"No, of course not," Susie went on. "Don't think I'm going to be cheeky now. Or if you do, stop me. And I can promise you now that I'm not going to say a word about Bournemouth, not going to mention the place."

"Thank you, my dear," said Miss Trant demurely. "As a matter of fact, the others haven't mentioned it lately——"

"No, they just look it now," cried Susie. "I've noticed them. Their eyes go rolling 'Bournemouth' at you. Honestly, don't they? I noticed Joe—poor darling!—yesterday staring at you, like a sick cow, and I really thought something was the matter with him until it dawned on me he was trying to stare you into telling him something about the Bournemouth offer. But what I was going to say was this—Aren't you really getting a bit tired of us?"

"Gracious, no!"

"Honestly now?"

"Not a bit. I won't include Miss Mamie Potter——"

"Gosh! I should think not."

"But I assure you I'm not in the least tired of the rest of you, of the party. I'm like you, Susie. I'm feeling restless, not knowing what I want to do but only knowing what I don't want to do. The thought of our spending a whole summer on the South Coast somehow doesn't attract me at all."

"I know. But what does attract you?"

"I haven't the least idea," Miss Trant replied, as lightly as possible, though it was quite obvious she was in earnest.

"That's me all over—up to a point," Susie remarked. "I do know what I want, though—and a fine fat chance I've got of getting it! Inigo *annoys* me. Doesn't he you?"

"No. Why should he?" Miss Trant was amused.

"Don't laugh; it's serious. Well, he could *do* something, and he just doesn't. He's so *feeble*—just the amah—teurrr, you know, ab-so-lutely." Here Susie gave a vindictive imitation of Inigo's careless tones. "When he follows me round, looking like a dying duck—and yet won't *do* anything—and is so high-and-mighty about the bits of things he writes for papers—though no paper will ever have them—and won't bother about his songs, though they might get him anywhere—oh, I could beat him, I really could! And then if I say something nasty to him, instead of answering back or putting his tongue out or giving me a good shaking——"

"Which I'm sure you've deserved," Miss Trant put in.

"He just looks at me—like the Norphan Child—and walks away, and then stays away, sulking. He makes me furious. Not that it really matters, of course, what he does. But just now, when I'm dying for a chance myself, it's enough to make me sick to see somebody who has a chance not doing anything. So that's that. And now you can laugh, if you like. Let's go, shall we?"

On the way back a curious thing happened. The side-road they were on joined the main road about ten miles out of Gatford, and it chanced that when they arrived at the turning the traffic on the main road, consisting for the most part of new cars from Gatford, was thicker than

usual, so that they pulled up for a minute or two. Miss Trant was idly watching the procession of cars when suddenly she stared intently and gave a little gasp. The next moment she was standing up trying to obtain a last glimpse of a car that had gone past them, there on the main road, and in the opposite direction from Gatford. The moment after she was sitting down again, still wide-eyed and a trifle pale.

"What's the matter?" cried Susie.

"I thought I saw some one I know—or used to know," Miss Trant replied shakily.

Susie looked at her. Then she burst out in triumph: "It's that man you once told me about, isn't it? Doctor McIntyre or whatever his name is? The one on the boat."

"Doctor McFarlane. Yes, I thought it was. But it was all so quick. Besides—oh, it's absurd!"

"Why is it absurd? I don't see it. Couldn't he be here as well as anywhere else? Haven't you ever tried to find out where he is?"

"No, I haven't," Miss Trant replied, not very firmly. "Why should I?"

"Why should you!" Susie was both sympathetic and derisive. "If it was me, I should know all about him. Doctors ought to be easy to find. Wouldn't it be marvellous if you didn't feel well and sent for a doctor, and then *he* came and said: *'What, you!'* You don't know. He may have been in Gatford or Mundley or Stort or somewhere round here all the time. Let's get back at once and find out. If you don't, I will."

It was useless for Miss Trant to protest, and indeed she did not protest very much. Once back in Gatford, Susie made for the nearest telephone directory and was so excited that she could hardly turn the pages. Susie was always wildly romantic on other people's behalf, and is to this day. But no Dr. Hugh McFarlane was to be found in the telephone directory, which cast a wide net in the district. This was rather a blow for Susie, but she was not daunted. She pestered Miss Trant until that embarrassed

lady was compelled to admit there was such a thing as a Medical Directory, where any doctor might be found. She was also compelled to admit that she had never examined one. "And how you couldn't beats me," cried Susie. "It's no use you saying you don't want to know, because you do."

"But it's all so ridiculous," the other protested. "I haven't seen him for years. He's probably forgotten my existence."

"And probably not," Susie told her. "The sort of man you'd like probably wouldn't, though I must say I wouldn't give most men six months. I believe," she added shrewdly and boldly, "you're frightened. I'm being really cheeky now, I know, but it's because I'm so fond of you. And I hate to think of you just looking after us and then sitting alone reading about the three musketeers or Robin Hood or whatever it is you do read about, when there may be somewhere round the corner, a marvellous Scotch doctor who"—and here Susie became very dramatic—"when he comes back to his lonely house, late at night, after performing all sorts of operations—and 'Bless you, doc!' the poor people say—I got that from a film—sits in his chair and smokes a pipe and thinks of you—and already his hair is turning grey at the temples——"

"Oh, do be quiet, Susie," cried Miss Trant, crimson, half laughing, half angry. "I shall really be cross if you don't."

"All right then, I will," said Susie, preparing to depart. They were at Miss Trant's hotel now. "But I shall go round to the Free Library and see if they've got that book with all the doctors in. You can't stop me doing that. Goodbye."

And about three-quarters of an hour later, Miss Trant was called to the telephone. It was Susie. "I daren't come round, and I couldn't wait," said Susie. "I looked at that book. It's stiff with McFarlanes. They must all be doctors. Honestly, dozens of 'em. I'm not sure whether I found the right one."

"He was born in 1885 and went to Edinburgh," Miss Trant told the receiver, and then heard a little laugh come floating back to her.

"Well, anyhow he isn't here. Isn't it a shame? I got it down to three—and they were all miles off—one in India and another in Aberdeen—and I think the other was in London. I asked the Library man if the book wasn't out of date—and he got quite annoyed—but when he calmed down a bit, he admitted that lots of the doctors could have moved since it came out. And he's seen our show—and he recognised me after a bit and was quite sweet. So I think it probably was him, don't you?"

"No, I don't," said Miss Trant. "It couldn't have been. You shouldn't have bothered. It's all—nothing."

And when she returned to her room, she reminded herself that it was all nothing. It is not much fun being so intimately concerned with nothing. The thought of it can even rob you of your legitimate pleasure in a good historical novel. Louis the Eleventh of France and the Duke of Burgundy made a poor show of capturing Miss Trant's interest for the rest of that afternoon. One sneered, the other stormed, but all in vain—poor shadows!

II

The time is a quarter to twelve on Thursday morning, the day after Elsie's wedding. The place is the little upstairs room (where there are plenty of cushions and you may smoke) of *Ye Jollie Dutche Café*, in Victoria Street, Gatford. In the far corner is a table that must be distinguished from all the others if only because it is the only one there on which any cups of Jollie Dutche coffee (*Our Speciality*) have made their appearance this morning. Behind it, sometimes lolling and sometimes sitting bolt upright and looking very fierce, are two persons, a tallish loose-limbed youth, with a long wandering nose and a long wandering lock of hair, and dressed in baggy and indiscriminate clothes, and a pretty dark girl, a compact and shapely girl, artfully tricked out in black and scarlet. The waitress who served the two coffees—she

wears a sort of federated Dutch costume, but has Gatford, Mundley, or Stort written all over her—recognised these two at once, and by this time has told all the other waitresses downstairs that one of the girls from the Hippodrome, the funny dark one, and the piano-player are above, having big coffees just like ordinary people. And we recognise them too: Miss Susie Dean and Mr. Inigo Jollifant.

"I never heard such cheek," Susie is exclaiming. "What's it got to do with you?"

"Oh, nothing, of course," the gentleman replies loftily. "Apologies for interfering in your private affairs."

He is having it out with her, and so far it has come out badly, not at all according to plan. Now he pulls away at his absurdly large cherry-wood pipe, and tries to do that loftily too. Unfortunately, it will not draw properly. If he had fifty pipes, they would not draw properly. It is one of those mornings, not at all the time to have it out with anybody, and especially Miss Dean.

"However friendly we were," Susie continued, "you'd have no right to talk to me like that. If I chose to talk to a man and dance with him, it's no business of yours. Besides, you know nothing about him."

"I don't want to. I know enough about him to see that he's poisonous. But—as you say—it's no business of mine. I'm disappointed, that's all. Some girls might like that type of chap, but for you—*you*—even to look at him, well, it sticks in my gullet, that's all! Why, even Mamie Potter——" he was going on rashly.

"Mamie Potter! You're not going to tell me what *she* thinks, are you? That would be the last straw. And you talk about people being poisonous! But go on, go on. What did Mamie Potter say?"

"It doesn't matter what she said," replied Inigo sulkily. The sooner Miss Potter was out of the conversation the better.

"Of course it does! Your friend, Miss Potter! You ought to have seen yourselves yesterday. And if we're going to tell one another who we ought to know, it's my

turn now, and I say, keep away from that girl. She's dead rotten from the knees up. Everybody's fed up with her already—except you, of course. She'll wreck this show yet, if we're not jolly careful. I know the sort."

"She may be all that. I don't know, and I don't care," said Inigo, quite willing to sacrifice fifty Mamie Potters. "But what I *do* know and care about is that you behaved rottenly, absolutely, yesterday. You just flirted with that bounder, that pink teethy barman——"

"He's not a barman. And even if he was, you needn't sneer at him. If I liked him, I wouldn't care if he was a bottle-washer. I'm not like you, I'm not a little Cambridge snob."

"No one could ever call me a snob," said Inigo heavily.

"Aw—aw—couldn't they?" said Susie, in a wild burlesque of his offended tone. "Well, I'm calling you one, and I believe you are one. And if you're not one, then you're simply jealous."

"All right then, I'm jealous." Inigo sounded very sulky now.

"Then you shouldn't be jealous," said Susie severely. But then she gave him a mischievous little glance. "Anyhow you oughtn't to be horridly jealous. It's quite possible, I'm sure, to be nicely jealous."

"No, it isn't. I hate it. But it wasn't so much jealously as sheer dislike of seeing you make yourself so cheap with a bounder——"

"If you say another word, we shall quarrel properly," cried Susie. "That's the nastiest thing anybody's said to me for years. Apologise for 'cheap' at once or I'll never speak to you again. I mean it." And she really looked as if she meant it.

"I take it back then," Inigo muttered. "But you know what I mean."

"No, I don't, except that you're stiff and green with jealousy. And why you should be, I don't know. It isn't as if we've been very good friends lately."

"And whose fault's that?" he demanded.

"Yours. Of course, it's yours, Inigo," and she gave him a wide innocent stare.

"You know very well it's not. Look here, Susie, you've been unbearable lately, absolutely. You know what I think and feel about you——"

"No, I don't," she put in, immediately. "Tell me." And she leaned back and gave him a delicious smile.

"Oh, I think you're——" he groaned. For a young man who intended to have it out, he was behaving very strangely.

"Go on, Inigo. Don't stop. Tell me." She made a show of settling herself very comfortably in her seat.

He pushed back his lock of hair, and then looked at her, steadily, gravely. "I'm not going to tell you any more, Susie," he said at last. "It's all just fun for you. You don't really care a damn. Well, it isn't fun for me, not just now, anyhow."

There was silence for a few moments, then Susie said, in a small voice: "Why don't you go on to the next part, Inigo?"

"What's that?"

"You ought to say now 'If you think I'm the kind of man you can play with, you're wrong."

Inigo looked confused, and, glancing at him, she laughed. Then she hummed a little tune.

"I'm going," he announced savagely.

"No, don't go." She laid her hand lightly on his. "I hate quarrelling. And if you go off in a rage, like that, you'll make me feel sorry I came here instead of accepting that Dulver man's invitation to go out in his car to-day and have a fine fat lunch somewhere. Yes, he asked me, and was *most* pressing. And I refused. I saw quite enough of him yesterday."

"I should think so," cried Inigo, highly relieved.

"Not that being with you is much good, these days," she went on.

"Why? What's the matter with me?" Then he suddenly changed his tone. "I know there's nothing very wonderful about me——"

"I'm sure you don't," she told him.

"I suppose you're sick of seeing me about," he said, humbly. "And the ironical thing is, I wouldn't *be* about here at all, if it weren't for you. That must be getting pretty obvious to other people too by now. Miss Trant pointed it out to me the other day. Because you're with the show, Susie, I couldn't drag myself away from it. If you went, I'm durned sure I couldn't stick it out another week."

"That isn't saying much for the others," she told him.

"Of course I like the others, at least most of 'em. It wouldn't break my heart to see the last of Jerry J. or the Potter girl, but I'm very fond of all the old ones now. But after all, I'm not in love with 'em."

"Which means you are with me."

"Absolutely."

"Still?"

"Worse than ever. So there you are. And if anybody had told me a year ago I should be dithering like this, I should have wanted to give him one on the jaw. And yet I wouldn't change it now, though a jolly rotten dither it's been lately, I can tell you."

"Sorry, Inigo. Sorry—absolutely."

"Tell me, are you fed up with me? Does the sight of me mooning round make you feel sick these days? Or what is it?"

"Well," said Susie slowly and earnestly, "I've been in a queer sort of mood lately, I know. And you've been so heavy and serious lately, too, not half so amusing as you used to be. But it isn't just that. You—oh, you irritate me!"

"Why? What do I do?"

"Oh, you're so—so—I don't know—feeble."

"Feeble!" It came out in a shout. He stared at her, amazed.

"Yes, feeble."

"Oh, am I, by jingo!" With that, the outraged young man sat up, suddenly flung an arm round her, twisted her

round towards him, and kissed her soundly and well before she could do or say a single thing. There are heavens that await only reckless men, and he spent a delirious minute in one of them. Then he found himself shot out of it, and back in *Ye Jollie Dutche Café* with all his courage evaporated. He waited, breathless, for something momentous to happen now, and though this creature by his side had been for some time the very centre of his universe, he had not the least idea what would happen. He could almost feel himself cringing.

Susie was staring at him, her eyebrows raised, and breathing hard. "Well——" and then she suddenly laughed.

His bravado returned with a rush at the sound. "And that's the kind of man I am," he announced.

"Well, it's not the kind of girl I am," she told him, "especially at twelve in the morning in an imitation Dutch café. So don't try it again, that's all."

"Didn't you like it?"

"It made me feel quite sick," she said calmly, turning an impudent face, still rosy and brilliant, towards him. "No, not again! Who do you think you are? Now listen." She looked serious. "When I said you were feeble, I didn't mean *that*. I meant you were feeble about work."

"Work!" Inigo pronounced the word as if he had never heard it before.

"There you are, you see. You don't even know what I'm talking about. You're just a feeble amateur, that's all you are, Inigo. This C. P. business—the Stage, in fact—is just a bit of a game to you. Well, it isn't to me. I'm a Pro. I'm not doing this for fun, young feller. I haven't run away from school for a few months."

"If you think I'm going back to that school or any school——" Inigo began.

"Never mind about that. It's me we're talking about now. I want to get on and if I don't get on soon, I'll burst. Why, that Dulver man yesterday——"

Inigo groaned.

"One of the first things he told me," she continued, "was that he'd heard how clever I was and was coming to see me, because he knew young Jack Rozzy very well, and young Rozzy is working with his father now, old Rozzy, who's the booking agent for the P. M. H. Syndicate——"

"Help!" cried Inigo.

"Don't be silly. Well, I didn't believe all he told me—the Dulver man, I mean—but still, it was *something*. You never know, something might come of it. And at any rate he did understand I wanted to move up a bit and not stick in this all my life."

"But what do you want me to do? Have I to go to young Rozzy and tell him to tell old Rozzy——"

"Oh, shut up! You think this is all nothing, and that's just what makes you so irritating. It's serious. Of course I don't want you to go to any Rozzies. I don't want you to help me. I can look after myself. But if you'd only go and get something done for yourself—and you could easily, with those songs—I wouldn't mind. I hate to see chances thrown away. It makes me sick. It's the way you hang about and just don't do anything that irritates me. It's so—so amateurish and feeble."

"So that's it, is it?" said Inigo softly.

"Yes, that's it," she replied defiantly. At this moment, another customer arrived, a solitary man, who came in, as solitary men always do, very quietly. A few moments after, three men entered together, making as much noise as a little army, as three men always do. Apparently all four were amateurish and feeble, for Susie regarded them with contempt.

Inigo had been fingering a card in his pocket. He still looked a little agitated, but there was the ghost of a smile hovering on his face now. "As a matter of fact——" he began; but then he must have thought this matter of fact should not be introduced into the conversation, for he suddenly stopped short.

"Well? Go on." Susie looked at him, not unkindly but not with any obvious signs of admiration.

"Nothing," he replied lamely.

Susie's rather full lower lip made a tiny movement that said quite plainly: "You are exceedingly feeble, this very minute, and not my idea of a man at all." She flicked away some cigarette ash from her clothes, and then rose. "I must go."

Inigo returned to his lodgings, wondering whether he had "had it out" or not. Certainly a great deal had come out, but very little of it had figured in his original programme. If it had not been for one thing, he would have felt miserable, crushed, about two feet high. That thing was the card in his pocket. It had been his original intention to tell Susie about that card. The moment she had shown herself repentant—perhaps a little tearful—he had decided to wave away all her apologies, and then to raise her at once from the depths of contrition by showing her the card and telling her what he had planned to do with it. That moment, as we have seen, had never arrived, and so the card stayed in his pocket.

It had found its way there only that very morning, half an hour before he had left his rooms to meet Susie. A young man with a masterful nose, wavy black hair, and a startling pink shirt and collar, had bustled in on the very heels of the landlady, and had announced himself as Mr. Milbrau, Midland representative of Felder and Hunterman. "And you can't say you don't know *them,* eh?" this visitor chuckled.

"Who?" Inigo was still rather dazed.

"Felder and Hunterman."

"I don't," said Inigo, looking at his visitor in astonishment, as well he might, for that gentleman, with all the dexterous rapidity of a conjurer, had put down his hat, taken a chair and drawn it nearer to the fire, sat down, lit a cigarette, crossed his legs and rubbed his hands, all in one flash of activity.

"Ha-ha, 's a good one!" cried Mr. Milbrau. "Didden' think you'd be up—'smatter of fact—but here y'are, up

all ri' and having a dig at the old firm." He rubbed his hands harder than ever.

"But who are they?" demanded Inigo, in all earnestness. "I seem to have heard the name before."

"Stop it now," said Mr. Milbrau. "You can't grumble. I've bought it—consider I've bought it! Let's ge' down to business, and stop pulling my leg."

"I'm not pulling it, no intention of doing, absolutely," said Inigo, who could not see why a strange young man in an angry pink shirt should rush in and talk about pulling legs. "All I say is that I seem to have heard the name of Whater and What's it before."

Mr. Milbrau stared and his mouth fell open, though the cigarette still remained hanging from one corner of it and calmly went on smoking itself, as if specially trained to do so. "Seem to have heard the name!" he almost screamed. "Felder and Hunterman, biggest people in the music-publishing trade to-day—*and* the oldest! And you a pianist! You mus' have played thousands of our numbers. Oh, you can't mean it! Here, have a cigarette." And the very next second, there were two rows of cigarettes about six inches from Inigo's nose.

Inigo politely refused, and filled and lit a pipe while Mr. Milbrau explained why he had called. "I'm doing this Midland round, d'you see—songs and dance stuff," he began, "and these two days I'm here, in the Triangle. Come here ev'ry two months. Went to your show las' night. Nothing else to do—and then it's business with me, d'you see, because we like to know how our numbers are going. And you surprised me, I'll tell you that now. You did! You surprised me. You've got a classy little show there, an' I know 'cos I've seen hundreds—hundreds-anundreds. That comeediyenn—oh, clever kid, clever! Whasser name? Dean—that's it. And that boy doing your light comedy work and dancing—that boy's good—he is—he's good. A nice li'l' show! Mindjew, some of the numbers"—here he raised both hands, then let them fall—"dead—you couldn't kill 'em—they're dead. I'm travelling about twenty numbers

now—both sentimen'als and comics—an' they'd juss make the diff'rence to that show of yours, they would, juss the diff'rence. No, no, wai' a minute, wai' a minute. Don't make a mistake. I'm not here to sell you anything."

Inigo was relieved to hear it, though he did not say so. He waited for his visitor, who was now lighting another cigarette, to continue.

"Here we are," said Mr. Milbrau, looking with half-closed eyes through a cloud of smoke at a scrap of paper. "Now you got one or two numbers in your show that were new to me—and they were—good." He brought this last word with a shout. "Tricky numbers, real tricky! They got me going all ri' and I'm in the business d'you see. I put 'em down on this bit o' paper. Don't say I got the titles ri' but you'll know. Now as a favour, juss as a favour, take a look at 'em." He handed over the paper, and Inigo saw at a glance that all the five numbers, headed by *Slippin' round the Corner,* were the very ones he had composed himself.

"Now all those numbers you have there," Mr. Milbrau went on, "are new to me. And I'm in the business. And they're good, they're tricky, they're catchy. It's the chunes—words are nothing, written 'em myself before now—it's the chunes! Now juss as a favour, jewmind telling me where you got 'em from? You're the pianist and so you know 'em all, d'you see. That's why I come to you. Got your address las' night at the Hippodrome after the show. And I'm busy—I'm terribly busy, gotter get away this afternoon—but I had to know. Now jewmind telling me where you picked 'em up?"

"Not a bit," replied Inigo heartily. "I wrote them myself—the music, you know."

"You did?"

"I did. As a matter of fact I've just finished writing them out properly. There they are, on the table."

Mr. Milbrau jumped up, saying "Mind if I look?", and without waiting to know if Inigo minded or not, began to

turn over the manuscript sheets and wag his head and hum now and again. When he had done, he put the sheets neatly together and gave the pile a smart slap. "Who were you goin' to give 'em to?" he inquired, very quietly but with a momentous air.

"Not the least idea," Inigo told him. "I hadn't thought about it."

Mr. Milbrau shook his head. "Hadn't thought about it! Doesn't know Felder and Hunterman! And turns out this stuff! Don't tell me you're a reg'lar pro—you're not—and I knew it right off. Suppose you wouldn't like me to take these along?" he inquired.

Inigo told him he would not.

"No. Thought you wouldn't. All ri'—don't blame you. Now I'll tell you something. If I was you—if I'd written these—jewnow what I'd do? I'll tell you. I'd put them in a bag, take my hat and coat and walk right out of that door, take the nex' train up and be at Felder and Hunterman's with 'em before they closed to-night. I would. An' I wouldn't play 'em another night, either. You don't know who's listening. I tell you, I'd be up in the Charing Cross Road with these numbers this afternoon and I'd stay there, never mind about the job here. In a month you'd laugh at it. I'm excited about these numbers. I don't look it but I am. But I'm not trying to rush you into anything, am I? You listen to me, Mr. Jollifant. Don't send these numbers anywhere. Take 'em. Go with 'em. Play 'em through yourself—once—thass all. An' if you go to Felder and Hunterman's—an' they're the biggest people in the trade to-day—once'll be enough. Take 'em to Felder and Hunterman's an' ass for Mr. Pitsner—P-i-t-s-n-e-r an' say I told you. Here, I'll tell you wha' I'll do. I'll write to Mr. Pitsner myself—an' tell him. I'll write to-night. Bedder le' him know your coming. Send him a wire. Busy man, Mr. Pitsner. You'd never see him if you hadn't an intro, but when you do see him, 's'business. Here, I'll write on this card too as well's send a letter. You show 'em tha', you'll walk up withou' a wor'." Thus Mr. Milbrau, who ended by gabbling

so furiously that there was hardly a consonant left in his speech.

And that is how Inigo came to be in possession of the card that saved him from feeling absolutely crushed after his talk with Susie. Back in his lodgings, he took it out of his pocket, put it on the table, and then smoked a pipe over it. Feeble, was he?

III

The various encounters of that week may appear to be of little or no importance, but actually all of them, whether real or imaginary (for we do not know whether Miss Trant saw Dr. Hugh McFarlane or only thought she did), were important to the people who took part in them, and indeed to many other people too. And the last encounter of them all is no exception. It happened on the Thursday evening, in the tap-room of the *Market Tavern*, the public house that adjoins—as it should—the space just behind Victoria Street where Gatford still has a weekly open market. The day for that market is Thursday, so that the *Market Tavern* was fairly crowded when Mr. Oakroyd visited it, a little after six, on this particular Thursday evening. Mr. Oakroyd knew that it would be crowded, having been long enough in Gatford to know all about such things. It was his habit to enjoy a half-pint about this time every evening, before he began his night's work at the theatre. Sometimes he liked a quiet, peaceful, meditative half-pint, and at other times he preferred a noisy, gregarious half-pint. It depended upon his mood. When a glass of beer is one of a man's few pleasures and luxuries, he will not casually swill it down, not caring when or where he drinks it. He will exercise to the full his power of choice. That is why places like Bruddersford are full of public houses. To the outsider, anybody who does not understand such matters, these public houses look all alike, but to Mr. Oakroyd and his friends they are as different from one another as the books in a bedside shelf are to an old reader, and a pint at one of them is entirely different from a pint at the next one.

On this Thursday evening then, Mr. Oakroyd, alone, in need of noise, cheerfulness, company, possibly the company of other men who knew the road, decided for the *Market Tavern*. The tap-room was all a babble and a haze, so crowded that it took him nearly ten minutes to push his way through, order his half-pint, and finally receive it over the dripping bar-counter from Joss, the big barman there. During this anxious interval, he had nodded to a few *habitués*, and that was all: he had not time to have a look round the place, which was incidentally the largest tap-room in all Gatford. There seemed to be a lot of strangers about, but then there usually was on Thursdays, chaps in from the outer districts and the country, and chaps who sold things in the market—genuine men of the road, though not on the grand scale. Once he had edged away from the bar-counter, taken a pull at his half-pint, and seen that his pipe of *Old Salt* was going well, Mr. Oakroyd began to look about him.

"'Ow do," several acquaintances called out.

"Na then," replied Mr. Oakroyd affably, giving them a nod.

There were so many chaps standing in the middle of the room, a long narrow room, chaps arguing in groups, that Mr. Oakroyd, who had not strayed very far from the bar-counter, could not see the other end. But there was no reason why he should see it, and so he stayed where he was, not feeling at all lonely now because he knew quite well he could join any of these groups if he wanted to and talk away as hard as the next man. He was content to muse a little, and take in, without making any effort to listen, the scraps of talk that came flying from every direction. "So I says to 'im, I says, 'Well, what of it? Oo made you boss o' the job?' And 'e says 'Clever, arncher?' And I says 'Clever, yer bloody self!'——" Then, from the other side: "I betcher 'e did, I betcher. Time me an' Jimmy went to Birmingham, 'e did. 'Ere, Jimmy, 'alf a minute!" Somewhere behind was the usual political reasoner: "Government can't do it, I tell yer. It doesn't matter what *you*

say, chum, they can't do it. They'd 'ave to pass a lor before they could do it. Don' chew believe Government can do what they like, chum." And so it went on, and Mr. Oakroyd, who had heard it—or something like it—many times before, listened with a touch of complacency. These chaps were all right, but most of them would do better to talk less until they had seen something. He, who had seen a lot in his time and might now see a great deal more before he had finished, was saying nothing. Still, they could go on talking: it did them no harm.

A moment came, however, when most of the chaps who had been talking at the tops of their voices suddenly fell silent, and there followed one of those curious lulls common to all companies. It was then that Mr. Oakroyd heard a voice coming from the far end of the room. "'E came to the back o' the stall, see," it said. "Big feller—proper fifteen stoner—but all blown out, all beer and wind, an' yeller blobs under 'is eyes like fried eggs—nuthin' to him. An' when 'e gets to the back o' the stall, 'e takes a good look at me. 'That's right,' I says, ''ave a ruddy good dekko, Mister Sexton Blake. An' bring Pedro the blood'ound nex' time.' Oh, you should 'ave seen 'im! 'That'll do,' 'e says —usual style, see——" And having heard so much, Mr. Oakroyd immediately began threading his way through the crowd to that corner of the room. There could be no mistake about it. That was the voice—never to be forgotten —of his old companion of the road, Joby Jackson.

Mr. Oakroyd found him in the furthest corner, the centre of a little admiring group. He wore the same red scarf and if the suit he had on was not the very same brown check he had worn before, it was twin-brother to it. His face was as red and his eyes as bright as ever, and if there was any change in him it was merely that he did not look quite so dashing as he had done last autumn. Winter, his lean period, had left some faint mark upon him. For a minute or two he was too busy concluding his story of the big puffy man, a story that demanded a wealth of illustrative gesture, to notice Mr. Oakroyd, who stood a yard or two away, holding his half-pint and puffing away at his little pipe, too shy to interrupt but determined to be seen.

"Well," said Joby, having dismissed the big puffy man, to everybody's admiration, "what about some more pig's ear. 'Ere, I'm paying for this lot. Same again, boys?"

He jumped up, and caught sight of Mr. Oakroyd. He stared; he frowned; then delighted recognition lit up his face. "'Ello, I know you! It's George. George with the little straw basket!"

"That's right," grinned Mr. Oakroyd.

Joby pushed his way round the table and clapped Mr. Oakroyd on the shoulder. "You mended the old stall. 'Alf a minute, where was it? I know. Don't tell me. We went to Ribsden, didn't we? That time big Jim Summers started 'is bit o' bother. But you didn't live 'ere, did you? Up in Yorkshire, wasn't it? Good old George! 'Ere, I've wondered about you many a time, you an' your little straw basket—four days at Sunny Southport that ruddy little basket was—an' your bag o' tools. 'Strewth, George, fancy you turning up agen! 'Ere, we must 'ave a gill or two an' then you can tell me the tale. Never mind them fellers, they can wait."

"Ay, I will that," said Mr. Oakroyd, one vast delighted grin. "I were fair capped when I heard you. 'Eh,' I says to mysen, 'that's Joby.' I'll just sup this off, then we'll ha' some more. Well, ar yer getting on, Joby lad? Is trade i' rubber dolls keeping up these days?"

"'Aven't seen a rubber doll for months," Joby replied. He began ordering two half-pints and kept on ordering them until he was served. "No," he said, wiping some of the froth off his face, "I'm out o' that now. Did well at Nottingham Goose Fair, then Tommy Muss—remember Tommy, 'im an' the tart?—'e sloped agen—an' then I started beer-shiftin', see. Got up Newcastle way and gets playin' pontoon back of a boozer up there an' loses the 'ole ruddy issue, stall and all—what a life!"

"What about mottercar?" Mr. Oakroyd inquired sympathetically.

"Oh, poor old Liz! She was napoo before I got up to Newcastle, just after I cleared out o' Nottingham, blind to the world. She gets goin' down a ruddy 'ill, see, an' I can't stop 'er. Down the other side there's one o' these removin' vans big as a row of 'ouses coming. I gives the old bus a turn at the bottom—an' wallop!—we're into the wall with our guts droppin' out. The poor old bitch 'ad got all 'er front smashed in. 'Finee!' I says, an' gets the stuff out, waits for the first feller with a lorry to give me a lift for arf a dollar, an' leaves 'er there, proppin' the wall up."

"Nowt else to be done, I can see that," said Mr. Oakroyd, nodding sagely. "Cost you more ner it 'ud be worth. Eh, but it's a pity! I've thowt monny a time abart yon mottercar, all fixed up to live in. It were champion."

"You wait a bit, George. I'll 'ave another before you can turn round. Any'ow, I'm properly in the cart after losing the lot in this boozer. I scrounges round a bit, an' then I meets a feller I know who's with Baroni's Continental Circus, goin' round to old skatin' rinks an' covered-over swimmin' baths with a lot o' cockatoos an' dancin' dogs an' mangy monkeys an' a couple of old trottin' ponies—see? You never saw such a piecan of a circus. I could make a better one out o' the market 'ere. But this feller—a feller called Johnny Dooley, a bit of a mug—'e says 'I can get you in. It's better than nothin''—so 'e gets me a job. An' what d'you think I was, when I wasn't feedin' the dogs an' shampooin' the cockatoos an' taking the tickets an' helpin' to move the how-d'you-do's? I'm Tonio the Famous Continental Clown. You oughter see me, my God! An' gettin' two pound five a week—when you got it! Everybody in that ruddy circus was dying of 'unger, honest they was. Even the ponies could 'ardly stand up. If you saved up and bought yourself a packet o' fags, it was much as your life was worth. They'd 'ave murdered you for 'em. They tore 'em out of your 'and. When I'd been with 'em a month, I'd forgotten what a piece o' steak looked like. There was fellers that'ud eat anything—they'd 'ave eaten you. ''Ere,' I says, 'I've 'ad enough of this. Time to give the Baronios and Tonios the soldier's farewell.' Then I meets a feller I know who's running one o' these mug auctions, see."

All this, and a great deal more, describing Joby's adventures during the winter, was poured into Mr. Oakroyd's ear as they stood close together, at no great distance from the bar. Two more pints, procured this time by Mr. Oakroyd, had been consumed by the time Joby had neared the end of his recital. He was now, once more, an independent trader with a little stall of his own, but only in a very modest way. "I've gone back to an old line," he concluded. "You'll 'ave seen it. Joey in the Bottle. Little glass figgers—put 'em in a bottle full o' water—waggle the cork a bit an' these Joeys dance about, see. Old—but clever, amuses the kids! An' very cheap to buy. Money for dust if you've got a good pitch. Don't satisfy me, though. I'm 'elpin a feller too when I'm not selling Joey—a feller that auctions oilcloth, smart feller. I 'old the pieces up an' give 'em a bang to show it'll last till you get 'ome. Workin' 'ard and savin' up, that's Joby just now, see. 'Ere, George, what you doin'? I'm tellin' all the ruddy tale."

Mr. Oakroyd stole a glance at the clock. By this time he was usually at the theatre—he liked to be there early—and he would certainly have to leave in a minute or two to be there on time at all. So he explained briefly what had happened to him since the autumn. Even then, however, he was interrupted. A big man with an immense grey moustache pushed his way through the crowd and laid a hand on Joby's shoulder. "Time to be off," he remarked, and disappeared.

"That's the oilcloth feller," Joby explained. "'Ave to push off, George. 'Ere, what did you say this 'ere show o' yours is called? Did you say they're 'ere this week?"

"That's right. *Good Companions,* they call 'em."

Joby's eyes widened and his mouth puckered up, to whistle soundlessly. Then he looked grave, confidential. "You 'ad any bother there, George, lately?" he asked quickly, with a rapid glance to left and right.

"Ar d'you mean?"

"*Any* kind o' bother?"

"Well, there's been a bit o' calling out o' t'back," said Mr. Oakroyd. "And that's summat new to us. Giving t'bird they call it, but funny part is, all t'rest o' t'audience fair goes off their heads, they likes it so much. It's nobbut a few o' t'back."

"You watch out, George," said Joby, buttoning up his coat. "You're in for a lot o' bother if you're not careful. Never mind 'ow I know. But I do know, see. You watch it, George. No, I can't stop. 'E's waitin'. Come in 'ere agen and look out for me." And, without another word, he was gone.

And Mr. Oakroyd did go in again and look out for him. He went in on Friday, and at dinner-time on Saturday, but Joby was not to be found. Curiously enough, there was no more "bother" either on Thursday or Friday nights, and all the *Good Companions*, little knowing what was in store for them, congratulated themselves on being free at last of the few stamping and jeering hooligans in the audience. Mr. Oakroyd himself, however, was not so sure. It was all very mysterious. Even Mr. Jock Campbell, on being consulted, could make nothing of it, though it was his opinion, the result of long experience in arenas, that all crowds were partly composed of lunatics. And though this was all very well, the fact remained—and Mr. Oakroyd could not ignore it—that he had been told to look out and watch it by Joby Jackson, who was sane enough, a philosopher of the road.

CHAPTER III

INIGO IN WONDERLAND

I

INIGO noticed, without surprise, that the Gatford Hippodrome was elongating itself, swelling, soaring, conjuring out vast darkening sweeps of galleries. This made it all the more difficult to find Susie. It was like playing hide-and-seek in the Albert Hall. After he had walked about quarter of a mile round the back of one enormous empty gallery, he suddenly discovered Mr. Milbrau of Messrs. Felder and Hunterman standing by his side. "'Scuse me," Mr. Milbrau was saying, "but the Tarvins are here." Somehow this frightened Inigo. He hurried away, ran down a colossal flight of steps, and entered a lower gallery. He must find Susie at once, and he knew that she was in one of these galleries. Halfway round he came upon Mr. Milbrau again. "Here he is," Mr. Milbrau shouted; and immediately a number of lights were turned on. The next moment Mr. Tarvin appeared, looking much smaller and fatter than he had ever done before. "Ah, there you are, Jollifant," he said. "We're looking—chum-ha!—for you." And there, hurrying up behind him, was Mrs. Tarvin, a terrifying figure. Her head was so big. As big as a coal-scuttle and with eyes like flashing lamps! Horrible! He turned and ran, and then all the lights but one dim glow, high up on the roof, went out. He raced frantically through deep menacing shadows. Gallery after gallery, innumerable curved flights of steps, were passed in this wild descent, but at last he arrived at the floor of the theatre. And it was packed with people. They were even standing in all the gangways. Now the place was brilliantly lit, and it was obvious that the performance was about to begin. He noticed for the first time that he was already in his stage costume. He would have to push his way through all these people. He pushed and pushed and finally reached the stage, where Jimmy was waiting for him. There was something faintly sinister about Jimmy. "Come on, Inigo," he croaked. "You're late. We've got a new stunt. Duets at the piano, that's the idea. Got a new pianist." And he hustled Inigo over to the piano. And there, waiting for him, was this horrible huge-headed Mrs. Tarvin, nodding and grinning. "I won't," Inigo shrieked. But Jimmy's grip on his arm had tightened. "S all ri', quite all ri'," said Mr. Milbrau, who appeared to be holding him now on the other side. Inigo struggled but he could not free himself.

"Hoy, justa minute, ju-ust a mi-in-ute!" This voice did not belong to either Jimmy or Mr. Milbrau. It was a new voice. It had no part in the proceedings. It seemed to stop everything.

Inigo stared at the man opposite, stared at his big blue-veined nose, heavy cheeks, and gingerish moustache. These features, he remembered now, belonged to the man who had entered the carriage with him at Gatford station. Yes, he was in a railway carriage. That was all right—he ought to be in a railway carriage. But why? Then, as he shook himself, yawned and rubbed his eyes, it all came back. It was Saturday morning and he was on his way to see Mr. Pitsner of Felder and Hunterman. He had wired Mr. Pitsner yesterday, Friday morning, and that gentleman, who must have received Mr. Milbrau's letter had replied: *Yes come along can hear songs eleven and twelve to-morrow.* And then he had had to work it all out with a time-table. How to get to London and back between the end of Friday night's show and the beginning of Susie's birthday tea-party this very afternoon?—that had been the problem. It had meant catching a fiendishly early train from Gatford to Birmingham and then getting the express. And this was that early train. The mere snatch of sleep, the shivering wash and shave in the darkness, the scalding gulp of tea, the dash to the station through the queer dim streets. And here he was. And nobody knew anything about it, he reflected, hugging himself. Not a word about Mr. Milbrau and Felder and Hunterman and this flying visit to London had escaped him. Ah!—that was deep. He meant to spring it on them as a surprise when he returned, that is, of course, if anything happened worth springing. If nothing happened, then nobody would be any the wiser. He was not going to let her think him feebler than ever.

He sat up and rubbed his hands. He felt cold and stiff and unpleasantly empty. It was too early in the day to be riding in trains, absolutely. The windows still showed a flash of angry red sky, and a chilly vapour hung about the flying fields. His eyes were hot and heavy, and somehow

he had to stare hard at things to see them properly. Even then they did not seem very real. His dream hung about the fringes of his consciousness like the mist on the fields outside. This world of the cold railway carriage and the dawn breaking over an unknown landscape appeared to have little more solid reality than that other world of the long dark galleries, the ever-appearing Milbrau, and the monstrously-headed Mrs. Tarvin. But this world, though it might have its minor discomforts, was infinitely the more pleasant. And warming, quickening, at the heart of it was his sense of the adventure. These two feelings never really left him all that day. In the last little room, the inmost place, of his mind was a tiny Inigo hugging himself and crooning over the adventure. And because the day started, like a dream, in the darkness and hurried him at once into the unfamiliar, it never quite lost its unreality; it might be large and highly-coloured and crowded with moving shapes, but it always remained brittle, ready to be smashed into smithereens by a mere cry of "No, you don't!"

"'Aving a bit of a tussle, wasn't you?" the man opposite grunted amiably. "Bootin' 'em a bit, eh? Gave my ankle a good old rap, I can tell yer."

"Sorry!" said Inigo, and admitted he had been dreaming. The only other person in the compartment, one of those little old women who seem to be for ever travelling on unimaginable errands, whatever the hour or route, was dozing in her corner.

"Saw yer drop off just after we starts," the man went on. "I've caught this bleeder three times this last fortnight—'ad to. My missus says we'd better go and live in Brum an' 'ave done with it. Doesn't like getting up an' making me my bit o' breakfus', an' yer can't blame 'er." He brought out a small tin, selected a cigarette end, which he contrived to light after it had been tucked away under his large moustache. "I've offered to make my own breakfus' but that don't do for 'er," he continued, complacently blowing out smoke. "Muss 'ave a proper breakfus', she says, me goin' out like this, an' so she sees I 'as one."

Inigo tried to imagine a deliciously domestic Susie insisting upon his having a proper breakfast on a morning like this, but he did not succeed in creating a convincing image of her in the part. Would she ever even share a breakfast with him? He had never thought of her having breakfast, but now that meal, hitherto regarded as a very prosaic business, a mere gobbling of eggs and bacon, became touched with wonder and romance. He heard her voice—he could always hear her voice though he could never call up her face—asking him to pass the marmalade. He saw himself as a delightful attentive breakfast companion, without stopping to reflect that never in his life so far had he given any signs of being any such thing.

The London express offered him breakfast as soon as it left Birmingham, and he accepted its offer with alacrity. It was full of people who appeared to be old friends. Even the ticket-collectors and dining-car attendants seemed to know everybody. Men leaned across Inigo to ask one another where old Smith was. He had hardly begun his porridge before the man sitting next to him suddenly turned and shouted: "Hello! Wondered where you were. I say, is there any truth in that story about Bradbury and Torrence?" Inigo, startled, was about to stammer that he had not the least idea, when he discovered that his neighbour was not addressing him at all but a man busy chipping an egg at the other side of the aisle. And though the ticket-collector examined his ticket and the attendants brought him food, they did it impersonally, without any of those remarks about the weather and the number of people on the train that seemed to be offered to everybody else. At first he felt as if he had blundered into a party given by a complete stranger, perhaps the Lord Mayor of Birmingham. After a time, however, he merely felt that he was not really there at all. The train and its passengers did not believe in him.

A chance remark might break the spell. He tried the experiment at the end of breakfast, when the man next to him was lighting a pipe.

"I say—er—what time do we get in?" said Inigo.

"Yes, rather," the man replied, poking at his pipe. And then he looked across the table at the man opposite, and, raising his voice, said: "I told Mason the other day that the Chamber of Commerce people were making a big mistake."

"Mistake!" roared the man across the table. "They're making the biggest bloomer I ever heard of."

Inigo's neighbour nodded vigorously, gave another poke or two at his pipe, then turned sharply. "What d'you think?" he inquired.

Inigo was quite ready to damn the Chamber of Commerce heartily, but once more it was the man at the other side of the aisle, the egg-chipper, the man who knew about Bradbury and Torrence, who was being addressed. And this fellow crossed over, put an arm at the back of Inigo's seat, leaned forward, so far forward indeed that Inigo could easily have set fire to his beard and thought once of doing it, and then replied: "I'm not so sure about that, my boy. Remember what happened after the Stavely Commission? Well, it might easily happen again—in *my* opinion."

It was very odd. Inigo did not seem to be there. They did not appear to believe he was a real person. But as he knew very well that he was there and that he was a real person, this only meant that that dreamlike sensation persisted, robbing even a London express of its substantiality and turning roaring tons of business men into flitting shadows. Even when they finally chuff-chuffed into the terminus, the sensation still remained. There was nothing about that gloomy phantasmagoria to suggest that reality was breaking through. The place looked as if it had been designed by the same mad architect who had built the colossal Gatford Hippodrome of dreamland. Inigo hurried out of it.

II

It was too early to go to Felder and Hunterman's, and Inigo was in no mood for exploring London. Besides, the

streets were being slashed with cold rain. One minute a pale sun would creep out and set everything glittering, and the next minute the rain would come sweeping down, up would go overcoat collars and umbrellas, and the streets would be full of people running as if for their very lives. A lunatic city. Inigo went into a tea-shop not far from the station, and there ordered a cup of coffee that he did not want. This tea-shop had the air of still being in the hands of charwomen. There were no charwomen to be seen but the place seemed to smell damply and cheerlessly of their labours, and Inigo felt that at any moment a number of them would come trooping back to dry it off. The waitresses looked as if they had not yet recovered from a bitter reveille that had dragged them out of their little bedrooms, miles away in East Ham and Barking, and brought them sniffing in cold buses and trams and tubes to this tea-shop. Every customer, every order, was to them an affront. Their day had not really begun; they had hardly washed themselves yet; and as a protest against being disturbed so early they banged down sugar-basins and cruets on the little damp marble-topped tables. At close range they used the sniff, and at a distance the yawn. Such patrons as they had, however, seemed completely indifferent, in no way affected by these marks of contempt. They sat lumpishly, unstirring, at their little tables, as stolid and incurious as the bags they had dumped down beside them. The one exception was Inigo, who found himself compelled to order, receive, and sip his coffee with an apologetic air. There was, however, an Inigo inside, the skipper on the bridge, who was already indignant and protesting. There appeared to be a general conspiracy to pretend that he was feeble, of no account. And this tiny bristling Inigo inside asked everybody and everything in this huge lunatic warren of a London to wait, that's all, just wait.

It is true that when he was actually on the way to Felder and Hunterman's he suddenly felt ridiculous. The whole enterprise lost its sanity, seemed daft and hollow. What

was he doing here with his parcel of silly songs? He ought to be going to Newman and Watley, the scholastic agents. They were solid and sensible. Their talk of French, History, C. of E., some games, £150 Resident, was reasonable, and not at odds with these offices and shops and buses and policemen. But Felder and Hunterman? Jingling songs? *Slippin' round the Corner?* Preposterous, absolutely! He was making a fool of himself. Everything he saw in the streets announced that there was probably no such person as Mr. Pitsner. The very name shattered conviction. By the time Inigo had reached Charing Cross Road, he was troubled by a little hollow place somewhere in the region of his stomach. He did not want to go any further.

There was still plenty of time, so he allowed himself to loiter. He began to look at shops. That saved him. Mr. Pitsner became real again. He had strolled into a little world in which the silliest jingle of a song was more important than Newman and Watley and all their clients. He had now no excuse for believing that his visit was ridiculous. Charing Cross Road was bursting with songs. If the shops were not filled with sheets of music, then they were filled with gramophones and records and saxophones and drums and banjos. The place seemed to be a Jazz Exchange. Moreover, he saw rows of songs that he had already played himself and dismissed as poor stuff. He marched into one shop and glanced through about twenty of its newest songs, and most of them were so bad that he found himself gleefully whispering "Tripe, tripe!" His self-confidence returned with a rush. These people thought day and night about these jingles, and even then they could only bring out this muck. He hesitated no longer, but marched upon Felder and Hunterman with all colours flying. He would show them.

"I want Mr. Pitsner please," he said sternly, handed over a card, and then without paying any more attention to the assistant, looked about him with a nonchalant, faintly contemptuous air. He refused to be impressed, though there could be no doubt that Mr. Milbrau had been right

when he had said that his firm was the biggest in the trade. The place was fantastic. It was a vast bustling warehouse of sugary sentiment and cheap cynicism. Lost sweethearts —in waltz time and the key of E flat—were handled here by the hundredweight. Bewildering rows of smiling negroes implored you, in spite of the fact that they were clearing anything from two hundred pounds a week upward in London and occupying luxurious suites of rooms and riding about in gigantic cars, to take them back to their shack in Southland. "Just Little Miss Latch-Key!" one wall screamed at you. "S'Impossible!" another replied. "She's a Blonde on Saturdays," one row sneered, only to be answered, two hundred times over, by a companion row that cried: "She's All I've Got." And these were not merely songs. The least of them were Gigantic Successes. They were Hits, Whirlwinds, Riots, Ear-Haunters, Red Hots, Stormers. Messrs. Felder and Hunterman announced they were "Handing You Another." Mr. Felder told you, in large crimson type, to "Get It Now and Watch It Grow!" Mr. Hunterman promised that it would be "The Sensation This Season at Douglas and Blackpool!" And together they implored you to believe them when they said: "It's the Big Hit They'll Ask to Have Plugged at Them!" They told you frankly they were compelling every dance band in the country to play it, they were sweeping the North, they were sending the West End crazy. And they were proud of it.

Inigo shrugged his shoulders. He still refused to be impressed. Oh, Mr. Pitsner would see him, would he? Very well. He stalked after the assistant, down the corridor, into the lift. Mr. Pitsner's room appeared to be at the top of the building and so he had ample time to imagine what Mr. Pitsner would look like. He saw a sort of super Milbrau, older, fatter, and more Hebraic, with even blacker hair and pinker shirt. He braced himself to meet this loud, hearty, designing fellow.

He did not meet him, however. He met a thin grey man, very quiet in manner and dress, a man who looked

as if nothing had surprised him for twenty years. He gave Inigo the impression that he was tired and that he knew a great deal. Possibly he was tired of knowing a great deal. There was no mistake, though. This was Mr. Pitsner.

"I'm glad to see you, Mr. Jollifant," he said in a low and rather mournful voice. "I'm not always here on Saturday. In fact, I'm nearly always at home. But this time you've caught me. People don't usually get into this room when they've just brought a few new numbers to us. If they did, I should never be able to get into it myself. But I had Milbrau's letter about your things, you see. And Milbrau's a very smart man."

Inigo, who had accepted one of the fat Egyptian cigarettes that Mr. Pitsner had silently offered him, agreed that Mr. Milbrau was a very smart man.

"Yes," Mr. Pitsner continued sadly, "he's one of our smartest young men. In fact, I'm thinking of taking him off the road. He's got something of a flair, something. I've backed his judgment once or twice and been rather fortunate. He seems to have been quite carried away by these things of yours. It's surprising," he added, in exactly the same mournful low tone, "but that doesn't happen once in five years, really new work coming from—well, if you don't mind my saying so—from an outsider. People think it's always happening, but it isn't. You're a pianist, aren't you?"

Inigo briefly explained what he was and what he had done, and Mr. Pitsner listened politely but with a sort of quiet despair. When Inigo had done, Mr. Pitsner touched a bell and told the girl who answered to send Mr. Porry in. "I'd like Porry to hear them," he said, watching the smoke curl from his cigarette. "He's our memory man. He never forgets a tune."

Inigo was bold enough to say that he hoped Mr. Porry would not remember these tunes too well. The moment he had spoken, he regretted having done so, but Mr. Pitsner, though it had been hinted to him that he might be a possible thief, showed no signs of resentment. He merely

shook his head. "We shan't steal them, if that's what you mean," he said. "It wouldn't pay us. Some people would, people in a small way. But it wouldn't be worth our while. As a matter of fact, Porry's here to prevent you stealing. No old stuff, you see, with a note or two altered. That won't do. If we want anything like that, we can manufacture it here. Now would you like Porry to run through them on the piano or will you do it yourself?"

Inigo said he would do it himself, but he did not feel very cheerful about it. No worse audience than Mr. Pitsner could possibly be imagined. It was incredible that he could be connected in any way with the rows of silly songs and the photographs and the screaming placards below. It did not look as if earthquakes and revolutions could arouse in him the least interest, let alone a few jingles. Mr. Porry, a nondescript middle-aged man, arrived and accepted one of those cynical Egyptian cigarettes, and then Inigo dashed into one of his later numbers. Having got through one, he did not wait to hear any comment from the two sitting behind him, but went straight onto the next, keeping that *Going Home* number of Susie's and *Slippin' round the Corner* until the last. By the time he had come to these two, he had lost any feeling of diffidence. He was simply enjoying himself at the piano again, and if Messrs. Pitsner and Porry did not like it, they could jolly well lump it. He slipped round the corner with all his old mischievous spirit. The music was in front of him, just as a matter of form; he never looked at it. He let the old tune rip, and as he played, odd little images of people and places, from Mrs. Tarvin and Washbury Manor to Rawsley and Sandybay and Susie and Elsie, Miss Trant and Oakroyd, came glimmering and joggling through his mind.

"A-ha, a-ha!" a great voice roared in his ear. "What have we here? Listen to this, Monte. *Tumty-tum-tidee-dee.* Don't stop, ol' man, don't stop. Let her have it once more."

Two other men were now in the room. The one who was imploring Inigo not to stop was a big fellow with a

paunch, a swollen face, and a humorous eye. That was Mr. Tanker. The other, Monte, was no other than Mr. Monte Mortimer, whose name was known even to Inigo, who did not pretend to much knowledge of the theatre, as a producer of revues. Mr. Mortimer was rather like a smallish, plump, and shaven Assyrian. He would have looked perfectly at home superintending the preparations for some gorgeous and possibly depraved entertainment at the Court in Nineveh. This life of big hits and gigantic successes had not left him so weary as it had Mr. Pitsner, but on the other hand he had nothing of Mr. Tanker's gusto and goodfellowship.

"I'd like to hear those things through," said Mr. Mortimer, after there had been introductions and explanations.

Mr. Pitsner nodded. "You ought to. I'd thought about you before you came in. I rather think they're what you're looking for," he added, in his usual tones of quiet despair.

"Two sure winners there at least, if you ask me," Mr. Porry put in, with the air of a man who knows the value of his opinion even though it has not been sought.

"That last is one, Porry," cried the genial Mr. Tanker. "It's tricky. It really is, by God it is. Tricky. You could plug that one till the roof went, Monte, and they wouldn't mind. Not like most of the bitchy stuff we have to keep playing. Have you got the words there, ol' man? Good. Well, when you come round to that one again, I'll sing it. I will, I'll sing it. And don't let anybody tell me after this that we baton-waggers are jealous. We don't know what jealousy is. Now then, ol' man, let her have it again."

Inigo did let her have it, and Mr. Tanker, who was Mortimer's musical director and a composer of these things himself, stood by the piano, humming and tapping and beating time, putting in some amusing little saxophone, banjo, and trombone parts. When they came to *Slippin' round the Corner,* he produced a husky little tenor voice that battled manfully with the song. Inigo, who by this time had decided that he did not give a damn for any of them, darted and flashed among the keys, in which antics he was

finally assisted by Mr. Tanker, who put in fantastic little variations, in the high treble. And now another voice was there, humming away. It had brought with it all the perfumes of Araby. Inigo was aware of a presence somewhere near him, but until he had banged the final chord there was no time to make out what it was.

"Whoa!" cried Mr. Tanker, mopping his brow. "Hello, Ethel! Isn't that a beauty? They're all damned good, but the last two are real hell-busters."

"Don't tell me you wrote that, Jimmy," said the lady who had just arrived. She spoke in a strong metallic voice, and indeed she looked a strong metallic person. Inigo recognised her at once as Miss Ethel Georgia, the well-known revue and musical comedy artiste. He had seen her on the stage once or twice, and had seen dozens of photographs of her. Behind the footlights she was a ravishing creature, but at close range everything about her, her face, her figure, her clothes, her voice, her whole personality, was overpowering, too stunning. Inigo felt as if he were being introduced to an amiable blonde tigress.

"He's just popped in from Little Woozlum or Puddleton-on-the-Slag," Mr. Tanker explained, "and brought in a bunch of winners. That's one you've just heard."

"What you have just heard, ladies and gentlemen," Miss Georgia wheezed nasally, in a parody of those dance-band men who announce their tunes, "is Ethel Georgia's new number, to be featured with sensational success in Mr. Monte Mortimer's forthcoming revue *Who Did?*"

"I'm not so sure about that, Ethel," Mr. Mortimer called out.

"I am, Monte," she retorted, with a flash of personality that was like a magnesium flare. "I want it."

"We'll see about that," he replied, easily. There was, however, a certain suggestion that he had tamed tigresses in his Assyrian days and could still do the trick, if necessary.

They all began talking at once, even the mournful Pitsner, who somehow contrived to hold his own with the

others without raising his flat sad voice. Meanwhile, however, Inigo found himself talking to another new arrival who must have come in with Miss Georgia. He was a rotund fellow, most unwisely dressed in a plus-fours suit of glaring Harris tweed. As he peered at Inigo through a pair of horn-rimmed glasses, Inigo felt that there was something familiar about this rather droll face.

"I'd like to have a look through those other numbers," he said, "before Ethel grabs the lot." Miss Georgia was now in the middle of the room, arguing with Mortimer and Tanker. "If she gets her lily-white hand on 'em, no earthly chance for yours truly. She's a terror. I'll bet you're wondering what the devil I'm doing here in these clothes. Well, I'll tell you. I ought to be just laying one nicely on the green now, out at Esher, but she rings me up, not ten minutes before I was due to start. And did I get my golf? Be yourself! Drags me round here, round everywhere. And I've got a matinée this afternoon. I've to be funny from ten to three until five to five. She's all right, she's not working till Monte puts on his new show. But look at me. Still working, rehearsing Monte's show—or what there is of it—and then can't get a round of golf in. Oh, she's wicked! Here, even the wife's frightened of her. 'Tell her you won't go,' she says to me. 'Tell her yourself,' I says. And did she? What a hope! Now let's have a look at these songs."

By this time Inigo thought he had recognised him. "Aren't you Mr. Alfred Nott?"

"I am. I'm the only man in England who is not not Mr. Alfred Nott. Can you squeeze a laugh out of that? I thought not. Trouble about that gag is, if you're sober it doesn't amuse you and if you're canned, you can't work it out. Every time I used to meet old Billy Crutch when he was soaked, I used to tell him that one, and believe me or believe me not, it bothered him so much he always ordered a black coffee and then went home in a cab, to think it out. Here, this looks a good number. Just tiddle it quietly, will you, old boy?"

But Inigo was not allowed to do any quiet tiddling. The others pounced upon him, though even when they had him in their midst they still went on talking to one another. It is true they were talking about him. He could not help wondering what would happen if he quietly walked out.

"The point is, Pitsner, you've got to let me have the first cut," said Mr. Mortimer. "And so long as the rights are tied up——"

"So long as they are," said Mr. Pitsner, out of the depths of his weary cynicism and Egyptian smoke.

"Well, you know that's all right so far as we're concerned. You can tie that string on the dog's tail now," Mr. Mortimer continued.

Miss Georgia yawned spectacularly at the lot of them. "Hurry up, for God's sake, Monte, and buy that bunch, anyhow. You've got one number so far that's worth a damn, and I brought that one in."

"Right, Ethel, quite right," said Mr. Tanker heartily. "I know 'cos I wrote some of the duds myself. But then I'm not jealous. I'm not a comedienne."

"Aren't you, Jimmy?" she cried. And then she let out a sudden hard peal of laughter. "You never know till you've tried. A bit of crêpe de Chine, Jimmy, and some powder might work miracles. Come round and I'll see what I can do for you, sweetie."

"Keep the big gags for the night, Miss Georgia," said Mr. Tanker with tremendous mock severity. "And now let's get on with the business. I'm thirsty."

Mr. Pitsner held up his hand and looked at Inigo. "We like these things of yours, Mr.—er—Jollifant——"

"You've got it in you, my boy," the irrepressible Mr. Tanker put in, clapping Inigo on the shoulder. "Your fortune's made—nearly."

"The point is this." It was Mr. Mortimer's turn now. "I can use all those numbers you've got there. And some more, if they're as good. And some more after that. Performing rights, sheet music, gramophone records—well, you know what happens or you ought to do. There's bags of money in it, as you know, bags and bags. And Mr. Pitsner here and I can start you going. All right. Well, I understand you came up to see Felder and Hunterman. You're not tied up to anybody else, not even negotiating with 'em, is that right?"

"Correct, absolutely," replied Inigo cheerfully. "Nobody in London has heard these things, though I don't mind telling you they've been a colossal hit in all sorts of places you've never heard of. With my troupe, you know."

"That's what Milbrau wrote to me," said Mr. Pitsner sadly. "Getting over tremendously in—where is it? Gatford. He said they were eating it."

"Good! I'll bet they were," cried Mr. Mortimer, who seemed to be in an excellent temper now. "Well, my—Mr. —er—Jollifant—you've come to the right firm here, no doubt about that, and of course you'll be willing to publish here. That right?"

"I should think so."

"And as you happen to be a lucky man," Mr. Mortimer continued smoothly, "you've struck—this morning of all mornings—the one man who's looking for you. That's me. I could easily come the old game, discourage you, say we've plenty of stuff just as good, and so on, but that's not my style, and if it was, I shouldn't be Monte Mortimer——"

"So three cheers for the red, white and blue," cried Miss Georgia derisively. "Band, please!"

"If you're solid with Felder and Hunterman, that'll do Mr. Pitsner here. Now I come in. I use those numbers" —he paused impressively—"and I use some more."

"Bravo!" cried Mr. Tanker.

"Now you're talking like a man, Monte," said Miss Georgia, patting him on the shoulder. "That's the kind of talk I like to hear. Give the boy his chance. And give this little girl one too. That number about slipping is mine from now on, eh?"

"So there you are," said Mr. Mortimer, smiling at Inigo. "And now what do you say?"

This was where Inigo began. "I've a good deal to say,"

he announced, with a highly creditable appearance of complete calm.

"I know." Mr. Mortimer waved a hand. Messrs. Pitsner, Tanker and Porry smiled in concert. "Terms, of course. Don't you worry. The terms will be all right. They're going to surprise you."

Inigo grinned. "That's what we're going to talk about. I've got some terms too. I hope they won't surprise you. But they might."

They all stared at him, and Miss Georgia pursed up her scarlet lips and produced a droll little whistle. Then Mr. Mortimer looked at Mr. Pitsner, and Mr. Tanker looked at Mr. Porry. If one of the armchairs had suddenly made a remark, had perhaps pointed out that it was getting rather tired of that room, they could hardly have been more astonished. Inigo walked over to where Mr. Alfred Nott was still examining the manuscript music.

"I fancy this one," said Mr. Nott. "Here, ol' man, you're not taking it away, are you?"

"For the time being," replied Inigo firmly, "I am." And he gathered the sheets together and then put them in the small *attaché* case he had brought with him. He did this with great deliberation, and reminded himself that no man who could justifiably be called feeble would have been able to achieve such calm and poise.

Somebody coughed. Then Miss Georgia, who was clearly enjoying the situation, suddenly let out a harsh scream of laughter. There was a murmur of voices. Inigo turned and rejoined the group.

"I must say I don't quite——" Mr. Pitsner began.

Mr. Mortimer interrupted him. "Leave this to me, Pitsner," he said. "You're all right in this. Now then, Mr. Jollifant——"

"What about a drink?" cried Mr. Tanker jovially. "That's what you mean, isn't it, Monte? For God's sake, let's have a drink before there's any more talking."

"I'm agreeable," said Mr. Mortimer. "We'll run round and have a look at Robert. He ought to be having an inspiration about now. Come on, Mr. Jollifant. Bye-bye, Pitsner, that'll be all right."

As they filed out, Inigo was rewarded with a huge friendly grimace from the redoubtable Miss Georgia. "I don't know what you're pulling," she whispered, "but some of you nice boys from college have got a Nerve. You'd get away with murder." She squeezed his arm. "You freeze him a bit. It'll do Monte good."

But Inigo could only stammer vaguely in reply to this. Faced with Miss Georgia, he had no nerve. She terrified him.

III

Robert proved to be a grave, white-coated American who stood behind a cocktail bar in the glittering basement of one of the West End hotels. Inigo did not know which hotel it was. He knew very little about these establishments, and then everything had happened so quickly. Leaving Messrs. Pitsner and Porry behind, the four of them had rushed down and entered an enormous car; the car had shot them round several corners; and after that he found himself looking at Robert. The entry of Robert upon the scene did not make for clarity and a steady progression of events. After two of his cocktails, the very largest and strongest that Inigo had ever tasted, Inigo found that the day tended to slip further and further into unreality. He himself was all right, solidly there in the centre and quite determined to do all that he had planned to do, but everything else, however bright and noisy it might be, was at some remove from himself and reality, all phantasmagoria. Throughout he realised that Mr. Monte Mortimer was a personage of great power and influence, who had only to clap his hands and your name would be in all the papers and on all the hoardings, but he did not feel any respect for him because, after all, Mr. Mortimer too was a figure in the phantasmagoria.

That is why Inigo, after being asked what the idea was, did not hesitate to speak out boldly. "You like these

things I've written, don't you?" he said. "You want to use them, and you'd like me to write some more?"

"That's it. And you're lucky, as I told you before. Hello, Tommy! Yes, I want to talk to you, but you'll have to wait. All right, make it Tuesday." These last remarks, of course, were not addressed to Inigo but to some stranger who wanted to join them. The place was filling with people, and most of them seemed to be anxious to talk to Mr. Mortimer. "Yes, you're lucky."

"No doubt you're right, absolutely," said Inigo, speaking with great firmness and looking sternly at two people, a very large man and a very small woman, who threatened to break in. "But I don't care much about that. In fact I don't give a damn."

"What!" Mr. Mortimer was horrified.

"Not really—not a damn. If you don't mind my putting it that way. I'm not trying to be offensive, you know, please understand that. Hello, is this for me?" For two more glasses, charged with the sorceries of the grave Robert, had suddenly appeared from nowhere.

"It is," replied Mr. Mortimer, a trifle grimly. Could this fantastic young man be drunk? The query, a hopeful one, was there in his quick glance at the glass.

"I want you," Inigo continued, after smiling at Mr. Nott, who intimated from a distance that the latest drink had been provided by him, "I want you to see a friend of mine, one of the girls in our concert party."

"Ah!" And Mr. Mortimer put a great deal of meaning into this single syllable.

"I don't want you to engage her, naturally," said Inigo with dignity. "You haven't seen her. But once you see her you'll want to give her a part. She's a genius."

Mr. Mortimer smiled. Then he nodded to several people, presumably important people, people with names and careers in the profession, people who would only be too glad if he would give them even the smallest part. And then he smiled again.

"Genius," said Inigo again. "The real thing."

The other was paternal. "Don't you bother your head about your concert party, my boy. You've done with that. In a month or two, you'll laugh when you think of it. You will."

"Because you've taken my songs, you mean?"

"That's right. You'll be too busy."

"Can't be done," said Inigo, who felt vaguely that this was a good hard business-like phrase. "Can't be done, absolutely. Those are my terms. You've got to have a look at this girl—'see her working' as they say in *The Stage* advertisements. Otherwise, no songs. I don't want to be vulgar—though I feel it's all in the part—but take it or leave it."

"But my dear chap," the great man protested, "it's absurd. It's all right standing by your friends—done it myself—but who d'you think I am? Of course I know there's always a certain amount of new talent knocking about in the provinces—I've gone down and spotted a few myself in my time—but really you can't expect me, Monte Mortimer, to go and have a look at a girl in a concert party I never heard of, you can't expect it, you can't really! No, damn it!"

"If you saw this girl—her name's Susie Dean, by the way," Inigo added, with a little thrill of pleasure, "you'd jump at her. Somebody will very soon, I can tell you that. And it might as well be you."

Mr. Mortimer shook his head and smiled like one who pities innocent and impressionable youth, ignorant as yet of this hard world.

This would not do for Inigo. "You never heard of these songs of mine before, did you? Well, this girl's better than those songs. And as a matter of fact there's a fellow too in the party, a light comedian and dancer, who's first-class too. This is no ordinary concert party, I can tell you. Hang it, I ought to know. This girl's worth fifty of that Georgia woman. Take my word for it. Why, if somebody had told you yesterday about these songs of mine, you wouldn't have believed them."

"That's all right," said Mr. Mortimer dubiously. "But now I've heard the songs."

"And to-night you'll see this girl," Inigo told him.

"To-night! You're crazy."

"The place is Gatford."

"I never heard of it," Mr. Mortimer moaned. "What d'you call it? Gatford? My God! To-night at Gatford! Oh, come now, you've had your laugh—let's talk sense, let's get down to business."

"I have got down to it," Inigo pointed out. "I'm up to the neck in it, absolutely. No Gatford, no songs."

"It's blackmail, my dear chap, it really is. You can't dictate to me like that. You're cutting your own throat."

"As to that," Inigo told him, at once heartily and firmly, "I don't give a damn. Have another of Robert's potions?"

"We must get a bit of food," said Mr. Mortimer. "I ordered a table here. You must lunch with me."

"Delighted! And, thank you. But I warn you," Inigo added, "I shan't unbend. The more food and drink I have, the more iron goes into my will. Even now it's got a metallic sound."

"Hang on a minute, my boy," said Mr. Mortimer, darting Assyrian glances to left and right. "Hello, Jeff! 'Lo, Milly! Yes, in a minute." And off he went.

Inigo found himself talking to Mr. Alfred Nott, who popped up as quickly and quietly as a fish out of the sea. The place was very full now, and Robert and his assistants or acolytes were concocting and shaking and pouring out and handing over their liquid fire-and-ice as fast as they could. Everybody talked at once, at full speed, and at the top of his voice. Inigo was trying to tell Mr. Nott, who was a friendly little man, all about *The Good Companions,* but other people's conversations or, rather, monologues were for ever getting in the way. He was compelled to learn that about twenty shows were rotten, their theatres full of paper every night; that various gentlemen of the profession had been touched for tenners; that various ladies had said

once and for all that they were not going to have their salaries slashed like that and that if Mr. Fenkel didn't like it he could do the other thing; that Queenie was at her old game, grabbing all the fat; that it was as much as your life was worth at the Pall Mall to get a laugh when Tommy Mawson was on.

"Did you say you knew Jimmy Nunn?" roared Inigo.

"Know him well," replied Mr. Nott, in his wheezing voice. "Me and Jimmy . . . panto in Burnley in nineteen—let me see—it must have been——"

"What?"

"It died standing, believe me," said a voice right in Inigo's ear.

He jumped and looked round. "What? I beg your pardon," he gasped.

"Granted," said the owner of the voice, with grave politeness. "I said it died standing. The remark was not addressed to you."

"I know it wasn't, now," said Inigo. "I'm sorry."

"But for your information, I may say it referred to the act of Kramer and Konley at the New York Palace," the man continued bitterly. "The act died standing and now they're through with Big Time. Isn't that so, Oby?"

"I'll say it is," said a voice from the other side.

"Thanks very much," said Inigo. He did not understand what they were talking about, but by this time it did not matter. This was not the ordinary sane world.

"Laugh," cried Mr. Nott, who was apparently just finishing a story, "I thought I should never stop for weeks. You oughter seen him, ol' man." And he laughed himself, and so Inigo laughed too, having no doubt at all that it had been very funny indeed.

Then Mr. Mortimer arrived again, with various people swarming and crying in his wake, and said it was time they had a bit of food, and led the way out of Robert's domain into a much larger room, more glittering and noisier still, a medley of little tables and hurrying waiters and popping corks and *Madame Butterfly* with full tremolo effects. Mr.

Nott went with them, and then Miss Georgia appeared again, bringing with her Mr. Tanker and two other people whose names Inigo never caught, a Semitic youth with waved hair and a small dark girl with the whitest face and reddest lips Inigo had ever seen. The moment they had sat down, waiters descended upon them with oysters and caviare and champagne and other things that Inigo ate and drank in a dim sort of way. Everybody talked at once, and Miss Georgia and Mr. Tanker, the Semitic youth and the small dark girl, all shouted to friends of theirs at other tables, and sometimes people stopped at the table because they "just had to tell you" and then Miss Georgia or the Semitic youth "just had to tell" them something back, so that it was like lunching in a painted and gilded pandemonium. Inigo, however, even when the champagne was still bubbling inside him, kept hold of the thread that had guided him from the real world into this sumptuous craziness, and though Mr. Mortimer affected the utmost incredulity and dismay, Inigo held on and only repeated his "terms," a word he liked to bring out as often as possible because he felt it was a word of power. Mr. Mortimer began looking at him with increasing respect. He condescended to ask questions, to which Inigo bellowed back (you had to bellow) the most enthusiastic replies. It was obvious that the great man was weakening. Inigo referred pointedly to the afternoon train he was catching, back to Gatford. The songs would be returning on that train too. Though of course they might come up to London again, those songs, quite soon.

"Get me a boy," said Mr. Mortimer to a waiter. Though the lunch was still going on, he took Inigo to one side, away from the table. A great man does not announce a decision when he is barely eighteen inches from a mixed grill. "I'll do it," he said impressively. "It wrecks the rest of this day, but I can fix that. Tell me where I've got to go and don't forget to see I've got a decent seat. Better wire now. I can run you down myself in my car. No, I can't—shan't get down till about eight. How far is this

place? About a hundred miles or so, eh? Do it under three hours and get back sometime to-night. You don't think so? You don't know my car, my boy. I'll eat it." And when the pageboy arrived, he gave him instructions and messages innumerable, and among them was one from Inigo, a wire to the Gatford Hippodrome to reserve one stall. The great Monte Mortimer would see *The Good Companions.* Inigo did not say so in his wire; he sang it softly but triumphantly in his heart. And all the lights in the place seemed to grow brighter; the waiters suddenly began bringing nectar and ambrosia; the tables were crowded with the drollest good fellows and the prettiest women in London, such laughter, such wit; and the orchestra stopped making an irritating noise and decided to play the most delicious little tunes, to fiddle you into a happy trance.

"I should like to ask you a question," said Inigo carefully, when he was taking leave of Mr. Mortimer. "You're a man of experience, you know the world. Do you honestly think I can be described as feeble?"

"As what?"

"Feeble is the word."

"I could call you many things," said Mr. Mortimer, perhaps a trifle grimly. "You're a young man who could be called many things. But not feeble. If you're feeble, most of the young men who work for me have been dead a long time. I don't know what you're like at pulling out the teeth of sharks, but in the ordinary way, just doing the ordinary sort of things, such as making a very busy and quite well-known theatrical producer go across England to see a pierrot show he's never heard of before, you're—er—well, you're not feeble. And—er——" he paused, artfully.

"Well?"

"You can tell her that from me. And that's where I get one in, don't I? Thought so. See you to-night then, and my God, if this girl of yours is a frost, you'll hear something from me. And, don't forget, these numbers of

yours have got to go with a bang. I'm banking on them, not the girl. Bye-bye."

Inigo caught the 3.15. It sent him to sleep and then wakened him at Birmingham. The train from Birmingham to Gatford was crowded with young men who all seemed far more excited than Inigo was, though they had only been to a football match, whereas he had been—well, where had he been? Oh, he didn't know, it was all so absurd. Perhaps on the borders of a dream—by train, and at a reduced fare, namely a single fare and a third for the double journey—to a Charing Cross Road that might easily have begun swelling and quivering like a bubble. Felder and Hunterman, Pitsner and Porry—the Anthropophagi and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders. Gatford station, however, contrived to hint that it knew what was going on in his own head. "Stuff and nonsense!" it said, platforms, porters, kiosks, and all.

IV

Susie's birthday tea-party, held in a large upstairs room in Miss Trant's hotel, was just finishing when Inigo arrived. There were signs that Mr. Morton Mitcham was about to make a speech over the ruins of the feast. Inigo, a little dazed and breathless, stammered something. Susie looked suddenly frozen; not a glimmer of welcome on her face. Miss Mamie Potter was not there because she had not been invited. But Jerry Jerningham was not there, either, though Inigo knew that he had been invited. All the others were present and were now looking at him reproachfully. No one knew where he had been.

"Nay, Inigo," said Mr. Oakroyd, who liked to speak his mind on all occasions, "this is no time to turn up, lad. I thowt you'd ha' been t'first here, I did an' all."

"That's right," said Joe, with that complacent want of tact which made Mrs. Joe, even yet, despair of him. "Where in the name of goodness have you been to, young feller? We want an apology from you."

"Oh, shut up, Joe," cried Susie. "We don't want anything of the kind. It doesn't matter. What were you saying, Jimmy?"

"I'm awfully sorry, Susie," said Inigo. "You see——"

"It doesn't matter," she replied, coldly and wearily, and then she looked at Jimmy as if it were a pleasure to see a real human being.

Inigo sat down, and though he knew his triumph was at hand, he could not help wishing that Mr. Monte Mortimer was waiting outside. They all began talking again, and he felt out of it. "Where's Jerningham?" he asked finally.

"Couldn't come, he said," replied Mrs. Joe, in a whisper that carried further than any ordinary tone. "He sent a note and a present—very nice, too—I mean the present—a box of handkerchiefs, all in good taste, and very acceptable, upon my word, I was surprised. That young man is a Mystery to me, and I don't believe in making them—mysteries, you know. If he'd come and brought nothing, that wouldn't have surprised me. If he'd brought his present himself, that wouldn't have surprised me, either. But not coming himself and yet sending such a nice present, now that is surprising. He's a Mystery."

But Inigo was not listening. He did not care whether Jerry Jerningham was a mystery or not. He was busy cursing himself because he had forgotten Susie's present. He had meant to buy it in London. They had all given Susie something—he could see the little parcels on the table—only he had forgotten. True, there was Mr. Monte Mortimer, who was really a large gift, but that was not the same thing. Here was Susie, twenty-one, never to be twenty-one again, though new solar systems should arise and new planets dawn in the blue, and he had not been here to wish her many happy returns and hand over something gloriously sumptuous and see her look at it, eager, excited, happy. She did not look a bit excited and happy now. Had her birthday party been a frost? Damn Felder and Hunterman and Monte Mortimer! He ought not to have bothered about them. And what did Jerningham, the little bounder,

mean by not turning up, merely sending some snivelling handkerchiefs?

"Well, Miss Trant, boys and girls," said Jimmy, rising, "time to go, if you ask me. We'll wish Susie all the good luck she deserves—and good health, that's a great thing in the profession, I give you my word—after the show to-night. We ought to go and have bit of a rest. It's a big night to-night, house booked right up, and all for Susie here. Gatford's going to get the show of its life to-night, I say, so we'd better take it easy for an hour or so before we start. That's all right, isn't it, Susie?"

Susie nodded, smiling at him but not too cheerfully. They all drifted away from the table. There was a movement towards the door. Susie began gathering up her little packages. This was Inigo's opportunity.

"Look here, Susie, I'm awfully sorry," he began.

"It doesn't matter," she said, and turned away. The others were going now.

This would not do at all. He grabbed hold of her wrist. "I'm awfully sorry I couldn't get here in time," he added quickly, "and I've gone and forgotten your present too. No, you must listen, you must."

"I don't want to hear anything about it. Let me go."

"I won't until you've heard what I have to say. You see, I had to go up to London to-day——"

"London!" There was a quick change of tone.

"Yes, London. I didn't tell anybody I was going. I had to see Felder and Hunterman, the music people——"

"Inigo, your songs! They've been hearing them. Have they taken them? Do tell me, quick!" She was excited enough now, and all her eagerness was for him and his songs; she was not thinking about herself at all. And this was a wonderful moment for him. He had sometimes thought she was selfish, and many a time, long after that day, he was to think so again, but the recollection of that moment in the hotel at Gatford always drove the thought out of his head.

"They want them all right," he began slowly.

"Oh, go on, go on. You're so *slow*. Tell me all about it quick. If you don't, I shall think you're feeble again."

"Well, you see, that man Monte Mortimer heard them too and wants them for a new revue of his."

"Inigo!" She gave a little scream of delight. Then her face fell. "You're pulling my leg. You never saw Monte Mortimer."

"I did, I tell you, Susie." And he told her what had happened in Mr. Pitsner's room. She listened, breathless.

"You're made, my dear," she cried. "You'll be rolling soon. Marvellous! I am glad. And now the poor old *Good Companions* are busted. Yes, they are—bound to be." Then, after a pause: "But I'll tell you straight, I hate to think of Ethel Georgia singing those numbers. You ought to have told him about me," she added wistfully.

"I did, woman, I did," roared Inigo in triumph. "I told him about nothing else."

"You didn't, did you? Did he say anything? Laugh, I suppose?"

"Laugh be blowed! I'd have given him laugh. What he said doesn't matter. The point is he's coming to the show to-night."

"What!" This time it was a scream. She shook him hard. "Inigo, don't be so daft. He's not coming here."

"He's coming here to see the show to-night," he repeated with great deliberation and emphasis. "As a matter of fact he's coming to see you."

"Monte Mortimer!"

"The great chief himself—if he is a great chief."

"But how?—why?—I mean, how did you do it? Oh, I don't believe it."

"I just told him to come down, and he's coming down. I've reserved a seat for him. I may be feeble, but when I start——"

"Oh, shut up about being feeble! I never meant it anyhow. Let me think a minute. No, I can't think. Oh, I shall be all in bits. I've thought about something like this hap-

pening so many times that now I can't bear it. I feel funny already. I shall make a mess of it."

Inigo was alarmed. "Perhaps I ought not to have told you."

"Of course you ought, silly. I'd never have forgiven you if you hadn't. I shall be all right when the time comes. If I'm not, then I'm no good. Gosh, what a chance!" She went twirling away, then just as suddenly came back to him, looking thoughtful. "Suppose he doesn't like me. That'll be a ghastly wash-out, won't it?"

"He'll like you all right," said Inigo. "If he doesn't, he's a fathead, absolutely. And he won't get any songs of mine. Under which king, Besonian, speak or die! That's what I shall say to him."

"Darling! But look here, Inigo, I'm not going to let you tie those songs of yours to me like that——"

"Listen to me. Never mind about that." He caught hold of her hands. "I'm sorry I couldn't get back sooner for your party——"

"Don't rub it in. I couldn't help it being furious, could I? You ought to have told me what you were going to do. Though it's more exciting like this, I must say, Inigo."

"That's the point. If nothing had happened, you'd have been disappointed and your birthday would have been mucked up, absolutely. As it is, I forgot your present——"

"You didn't. The great Monte's my present. Marvellous present!"

"And I never wished you anything. It isn't too late, is it? Many happy returns of the day, Susie."

"Thank you." She said this quietly, demurely. But then, with a glorious rush: "Oh—I'm an idiot—but I'm so happy. Inigo, you are a darling." And her arms were about his neck and she had kissed him, all in a flash.

For a minute or two he held her there. No, not for a minute or two. These were not minutes, to be briskly ticked away by the marble clock on the mantelpiece and then lost for ever; the world of Time was far below, wrecked, a darkening ruin, forgotten; he had burst through into that

enchanted upper air where suns and moons rise, stand still, and fall at the least whisper of the spirit. Let us leave him there. We must remember that he was a romantic and extravagant youth and very much in love—a young ass. Nor must we forget that such asses do have such moments. Isis still appears to them as she once appeared to that Golden Ass of the fable, and they still feed upon her roses and are transfigured.

CHAPTER IV

A BENEFIT PERFORMANCE

I

THE last time we were actually present when *The Good Companions* began a performance was on a Saturday night, the first real Night they had, at Sandybay, months ago. That was a tremendous occasion—or so it seemed then—but it was nothing to this, a Saturday night at the Gatford Hippodrome. Susie's birthday, Susie's benefit, with Mr. Monte Mortimer due to arrive almost any time, and every seat in the house taken—even the box. Yes, the Gatford Hippodrome had a box—not four boxes, not two boxes, but one solitary box. Its curtains were rather dingy, and it was difficult to make out whether its four little chairs were gilded or not, but nevertheless it was a proper box, ready to receive any great personage visiting the town who expressed a wish to attend a performance at the Hippodrome. And of course it could be booked, in the ordinary way. But as great personages rarely visited the Hippodrome and other people preferred to sit in comfort, this box was not often occupied, though professional friends of the manager would occasionally accept a seat in it for an odd hour. But now, on this great night, it had been taken. Nobody knew who had taken it, or at least nobody admitted having any knowledge. Thus, Jerry Jerningham might possibly have known something about it. He was not asked, partly because he was not there to be asked until there was

barely time for him to change and make up for the opening chorus, and then again because no one imagined he would know anything about it. Mrs. Joe might have asked him, because she was more pleased, excited, and curious about that box than anybody else. In her opinion, the box gave Tone to the whole evening. She looked forward to catching the gleam of a white dress front, to hurling a good chest note at a possible diamond tiara. And then again, as she pointed out, with a box you never never knew; anybody might be in the box, and anything—a solid contract for Bournemouth, for example—might come out of it. She was interested, excited, and made no secret of the fact. Perhaps the prophetic instinct was working in the depths of her mind—all conscientious contraltos, after all, sound prophetic—for it must be admitted that that box was important.

Indeed, everything is important now. The sands are running out, so that every grain has some significance.

That is why we must be there in time to see the curtain rise. We have done it before, but we must do it again because this is the last time the curtain will rise on *The Good Companions.* There will never be another opening chorus for them all after this one. That is what none of them knows, not even Mrs. Joe, who has the deep notes of Cassandra herself. They are all eager to make this night a success, and the thought of the packed house recurs to them continually, warming them like wine. But most of them are still wondering about things. Miss Trant, having a word here, a word there, behind the scenes, still wonders what she is to do about it all, and now and then remembers the figure of a man in a car, a man so like the ghost that has long haunted the dim corridors of her mind. The older players are still wondering about the future, that Bournemouth offer. Inigo and Susie are troubled by thoughts of Mr. Monte Mortimer. Jerry Jerningham obviously has concerns of his own, which he keeps to himself. Even Miss Mamie Potter keeps asking herself what these people propose to do and whether she had better stick

to them through the summer and then take a chance in town in the autumn. And Mr. Oakroyd wonders what is going to happen to him, and what is happening in Canada, and what is happening in Bruddersford, for no news has trickled through from Ogden Street for some time. There they are then, all as eager and excited as you please but all busy wondering and pondering and planning a little. And not one of them guesses that this is the last time they will troop on together, that their semicircle is about to be broken for ever, that already the powder has been heaped and the train set and fired.

They have crowded in from Mundley and Stort as well as from Gatford itself, and many of them have seen the show before and know who Susie is and why she is having a benefit. Mechanics, fitters, electricians, clerks and cashiers from the motor works, with their wives and sweethearts; typists and milliners and elementary-school teachers; women who might be anybody's wife or nobody's; men who might at any moment be awarded a medal or given five years' penal servitude, who might be heading for the town council or the gutter; lads who gape and nudge one another and guffaw; girls who wriggle their shoulders, slap their companions, and giggle; quiet girls whose lives are as yet only a vague dream; decent young men who slip in and out of the works and their lodgings, always near a crowd and yet as lonely as Crusos; jovial middle-aged fellows who earn good money and can eat anything, and their tired wives, who have been fighting, right up to six o'clock this very evening, the week's long battle for cleanliness and respectability; wistful virgins who are eager to feast their eyes on the face of Jerry Jerningham, and amorous gentlemen who have a fancy for Miss Mamie Potter's legs; people who ought to be in hospital, people who ought to be in prison, people who ought to be attending the Victoria Street Wesleyan Chapel concert, the Triangle Girl Guides Rally, the debate at the Mundley Y. M. C. A., the Gatford Cycling Club Whist Drive, people who ought to be helping their father in the shop, people who ought to be in the

Blessed Isles, so long and hard have they laboured in this unblessed island; they are all here, staring, chattering, eating chocolates, reading football scores in the paper, turning over their programmes. And now, just when they are all tired of amusing themselves, out go the lights above and up come the footlights illuminating the lower folds of the curtain in the old enchanting way. Is the curtain going up now? No, they will play something first; they always do. There it goes: *Rumty-dee-tidee-dee, Rumty-dee-tidee.* Some of the audience know this tune. It is a song called *Slippin' round the Corner,* and that good-looking young fellow, who dances, sings it. Is-ern-tit lovely? And at this moment, as it comes softly twirling through the magically lighted curtain, the mischievous lilt of it working like leaven in the dark mass of the audience, it is lovely indeed, a rhapsody of love and idleness, news from another and brighter world than this in which we portion out our wages. It dances Gatford clean away; the streets, the factories and shops, the long rows of houses, the trams and lorries, the ugly little chapels and the furtive pubs, they tremble a little, they sway, they rock violently, and then off they go, jogging away into nothing, slipping for ever round some vast unimaginable corner. A little louder now, as if in triumph. Nothing remains but clean earth and a blue spangle of stars, and the lilt and the beat and the *Rumty-dee-tidee* pulsating in the velvet darkness. Louder still now, more triumphant. And up it comes, shaped and coloured anew by the sorcery of the flying crotchets and quavers, this other Gatford, shining and fair, a suburb of Old Cockayne, with fountains spouting the alternate black and gold of Guiness and Bass, gold-flake and honey-dew heaped in the streets, arcades of meat and pudding done to a turn, silk stockings and jumpers to be picked where you like, dances round every corner and a prize for everybody, goals to be scored at any hour of the day, girls like laughing and passionate queens, boys who would love you for ever and always in evening dress, and children, swarms of them, rosy and fat, with never a white drawn face or a

twisted limb, scampering everywhere, running and tumbling out of the happy houses, out of the depths of memory, out of the very grave. . . .

Ah, that was good, that was. Took you back, took you out of yourself, took you somewhere, you didn't know where. It deserves a clap. And to-night it's getting one. The piano by itself now. The curtain's going up. There they are, singing away, pretty as a picture. Give them another good clap. The two girls look lovely, don't they? You can't call that other one a girl; she's getting on, she is; but she's a fine singer for all that, a real good turn. But the two girls look lovely. That's the new one, the one in the blue. But the other's the one, her in the red, Susie Dean. It's her that's having the benefit. Make a cat laugh, the way she takes people off, but she's nice and pretty too. Look at her smiling. That red dress just suits her, dark eyes and dark hair. Well-made too, that girl. She'll be married though, they always are. If she isn't, she'll be marrying that nice-looking boy, Jerry they call him. Oh, he's a good turn. Just watch his feet. And there's the comic, the little one at the end, twisting his face about, Jimmy Nunn. He'll come on as a postman soon—and laugh, he'd make you die laughing! That tall one—no, the very long thin man, him with the eyebrows—he plays the banjo and then he does conjuring. They say he's played before the King and Queen or something like that. Quite a comic too, in his way, when he's conjuring. That other one, with the big shoulders on him, is a singer. He usually starts them off. That's right: "Courtney Brundit will sing Number Twenty-seven on the programme." That's him. And that young fellow at the piano can play all right, my words he can! It's a gift to be able to play like that. They say he's just married that new one, but of course you can't believe everything you hear.

The curtain is up, the show has begun. It is time we left the audience and went behind the scenes. We shall never find our way there again, after this night.

II

The trouble began when Joe was singing, at the very opening of the programme. It was a cloud no larger than a man's hand, but there it was. As usual, Joe was giving his audience, whom he apparently imagined to be a company of would-be navigators, some advice concerning the Deep, the Moi-oi-oighty Dee-ee-eep. Just as he was imploring them, for the fourth or fifth time, to Beeware (many Brave Hearts being asleep in this Deep), a horribly raucous and penetrating voice told him to "pur a sock in it." It came, this voice, from the back of the pit, which was the cheapest part of the house, there being no gallery. And it raised a loud and jeering laugh from that quarter, though the rest of the audience immediately made shushing noises. Joe himself seemed to pay no attention to this voice; he went on with his song; but Inigo at the piano noticed that his great fists were clenched and that certain veins in his forehead were swelling ominously. Joe, it was clear, was very annoyed, as he had every right to be. Besides, it was not the first time that voice had jeered at them. It had been heard one or two nights before.

When Joe had finished his first song, he was warmly applauded, the audience—bless them!—being as usual all the more enthusiastic because some of their number had been rude enough to interrupt. But from that same place at the back there came boos and groans and ironic cheers and they were so prolonged that they outlasted the applause. Joe was furious. "Bloody swine!" he muttered to Inigo, across the piano. "They're at it again."

"Ladies and gentlemen," he cried, "by special request —*The Trumpeter.*"

"Shurr up!" the voice jeered, before anybody else could make a sound.

Some people laughed. The remainder indignantly shushed again and then clapped.

"If the gentleman at the back doesn't shut up," roared

Joe, his honest face inflamed even through the make-up, "he'll be soon made to shut up."

"Steady, Joe boy, steady!" whispered Jimmy, who was sitting just behind him. Most of the others had left the stage, as they usually did during an individual act.

The gentleman at the back and his friends signified their contempt for this threat, but other people in the audience, not having paid their money to listen to the town roughs, welcomed it. "Turn him out," they cried. For a minute or two there was quite an uproar in the place. Joe grimly waited until there was quiet again, and then began his series of apparently idiotic questions to a trumpeter.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Joe, in the wings, was very agitated indeed. "I'm convinced now," she declared, "that it's all a put-up affair. Before, I wasn't, though I had my suspicions. I know what you're going to say, Susie and you, Miss Trant, that some pros always think it's a put-up affair if there's ever a bit of booing or stamping. And so they do, and very silly too I call it. But there's a Limit."

"It's disgusting," said Miss Trant, "and we've certainly had more than our share of it this week."

"Perhaps it'll stop soon," said Susie hopefully, still busy with thoughts of Mr. Monte Mortimer. "They may settle down when the show's got going."

"And they may not," retorted Mrs. Joe, who perhaps did not like the suggestion that the show had not got going when her husband was actually on the stage. "It sounds bad to me, and put-up. And whatever will those people in the box think! Booking it specially like that and coming in evening dress and then hearing such—such—Devilry!" For there were people in the box now, and Mrs. Joe had caught sight of a white shirt front and a bare arm on the ledge.

"Well, if there's any more of it," Miss Trant announced with decision, "I'm going to have them turned out. It's vile and unpardonable, and I'm not going to have it."

"If they spoil it for me to-night," Susie said fiercely, "I'll—I'll kill them, the beasts."

"Don't say that, my dear," said Mrs. Joe. "And if there's to be anything of that sort, Joe will do it. Just listen to that! The temper he'll be in now, it won't bear thinking of. It'll take me all my time to keep him quiet. You've no idea what Joe's like when he's thoroughly roused," she added, with a droll mingling of shame and pride. "Take a peep at him now, my dear. He's fairly bursting."

Miss Mamie Potter strolled up. She was on next. "I say," she said, turning her round features from one to the other of them, "what's up? They're not giving out the bird, are they? If they're starting that, I'm through. I shall just walk off. I will. I can't stand it."

"If there is any trouble while you are on, Miss Potter," Miss Trant told her, "don't take any notice of it. I'll have it stopped somehow or other, if I've to go and do it myself."

"That's all right," replied Mamie dubiously, "but I'm not used to it."

"Neither are we," Susie put in, like lightning. "And I'll tell you something for your own good. Monte Mortimer's going to be in front to-night."

"Monte Mortimer! The big revue man! That's likely, isn't it? I've heard those yarns before, Miss Dean," Mamie scoffed.

"All right then, don't believe me." And then, in reply to the wondering glances of the other two, she went on: "It's true. Inigo went up to town to-day, saw him, and persuaded him to come and see us to-night."

"Well, I never did," Mrs. Joe gasped. "Not that he's any use to me—or Joe, of course. But it's your Chance, Susie. What did I tell you, only the other day? You see, you never know."

"I say, d'you mean it?" Miss Potter was apparently convinced now. "Where's he sitting? Is he here now?"

"Fourth row of the stalls," Susie replied shortly. "I know because Inigo showed me the seat before we started.

He's not come yet, but he's coming all right. Inigo got a wire after he had started."

"And my God, I've got to go on now. That's a nice trick, anyhow," cried Miss Potter, looking angrily at Susie. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Because I hadn't a chance. Nobody's trying to crab you. He'll see plenty of you before the night's out. Lord, listen to that! Joe'll be furious."

He was. They were applauding him loudly enough, but you could plainly hear the catcalls and booing from the back.

"Hear that?" he growled, as he joined them, and Miss Potter, looking very uneasy, got ready to take his place. "There's somebody at the back there'ud get such a pug in the lug——"

"It's bad and I don't doubt it's deliberate, put-up," his wife interrupted, putting a hand on his arm, "but don't let's have vulgarities. We can be ladies and gentlemen, I say, even if they can't."

"And I say they'd get such a pug in the lug if I could get at 'em. They'd better look out, that lot. I've a good mind to go and stand there when some of you are on, and keep 'em quiet one way or the other."

"You've a good mind to do nothing of the sort," cried Mrs. Joe indignantly. "Starting bother like that, Joe! You don't know how it might all end up. And Susie here with such a Chance!"

"Chance?"

"Of a Lifetime," she told him, and then hastily explained why this was a night of nights.

Miss Mamie Potter was not faring any better than Joe. Indeed, it was worse for her. She had not much of a voice, and very soon this was pointed out to her by the back of the pit. By the time she had struggled through to the end of one feeble little song, Jimmy signalled to her not to sing any more but to do her dance and then finish the act. It is not easy to interrupt a dance but the roughs at the back did what they could. Miss Potter really could

dance, and her beautiful flashing legs provoked a fine outburst of applause, but still the row at the back could not be drowned. And the audience was growing restless.

Jimmy dashed off while Miss Potter was taking her call. "We'll do that Shopping concerted number next," he cried. "Must do something noisy. Can't you tell them to stop that row, Miss Trant, please?"

"I'm going to, now," she replied. And she went, there and then. The manager was not to be found anywhere in the building, and nobody appeared to know where he was. There were only two men attendants for the auditorium, and neither of these was young, strong, and determined. The man in the pit, a decrepit fellow, protested that he was doing his best to stop the constant interruptions. "But they're a tough lot, Miss," he whispered. "I give you my word. Don't know what they're doing here at all, I don't."

"Send out for a policeman," she said.

"Ought to be a bobby about," he replied doubtfully. "Usually looks in, but don't seem to have come this way to-night. However, there's one at the corner could look in, dare say. Keep 'em quiet, p'raps, if they saw him."

Five minutes later, a policeman arrived and stood just behind the noisy fellows, after letting them know, by a familiar "Now then, there! Give order!" that the Law itself in all its blue and silver majesty was taking charge. It happened though that there was little need of him. The concerted item they were giving now was a noisy, rollicking affair that offered great scope to Susie and Jimmy for droll by-play. And they had hardly begun singing the first verse, which was a mere excuse for the drolleries that came after, when Susie remarked a stir in front. Some one had just arrived, was finding his place in the fourth row, the end seat on the left of the gangway. It must be—could only be —the great Monte Mortimer. Susie flashed a glance at Inigo, who lifted an eyebrow in reply. For a minute or two, she felt horrible, wobbly on her legs and hot and dry in the mouth; everything went out of her head, words, business, everything; and she felt she could never be amusing on the stage again. Then a huge friendly laugh came over the footlights to her from the audience, tickled by some bit of business she had gone through quite mechanically. And then all her nervousness fell away from her, leaving her excited somewhere inside but feeling clear, masterful, full of wonderful tricks. She hurled herself into the little scene, became a laughing whirlwind of fun. She acted everybody, Jimmy included, clean off the stage. All the silly shopgirls she had ever seen, the girls who sniffed, the girls who were short, sagging, and wistful, the girls who were tall, haughty, and spoke through their noses, the girls who knew nothing and the girls who knew everything, were vividly present in her mind, and in a happy fury of inspiration she brought out the lot, created and destroyed them in a few seconds. The audience laughed; they roared; they leapt at her. Even those people in the box—and who were those people in the box?—seemed to be laughing, leaning forward; and once she thought she heard a voice she knew. As for Mr. Monte Mortimer, she could not see him and did not know what was happening to him; but if he did not like this, he could do the other thing.

"Must keep it going now," cried Jimmy, as they bustled off. "You next, Jerry. Keep 'em going, boy. Show 'em what you can do."

And Jerry did. He slipped round the corner for them. While he sang it, there was nothing there but a good little tune, but once he began dancing it was soon packed with meanings that had escaped both words and music. His long graceful legs and twinkling witty feet held the crowd in thrall. When finally he appeared to hurl away the last shreds of restraint, capering crazily and yet still keeping it all as deft and neat as surgery, and Inigo tossing his lock of hair over the piano was joined by Jimmy with his drums, Mitcham with his banjo, and the others as chorus, the house rose at him. A last double kick—*pom-pom*—and he was standing there, glittering a little and gasping, smiling at them. They pounded and thundered their approval.

He bowed, flashed a smiling glance at the box, bowed again, then retired. Back he had to come, and for another delicious five minutes his feet told them how amusing life was. Another storm, and this time the girl attendant who looked after the stalls came forward and handed up some small parcels, one of which apparently demanded another smiling glance at the box, to say nothing of innumerable bows to the rest of the house. The others in the wings, clapping too, caught a glimpse of a gold cigarette case. The other tributes were boxes of cigarettes and chocolates, customary offerings on the altar of hopeless passion. But that cigarette case did not suggest Gatford. Even the most devoted typist or shopgirl could not have given him that lovely glittering thing. Jerry, however, who appeared to be becoming more mysterious every minute, rushed down to his dressing-room, and offered no explanations.

It had been arranged that Susie should go on next. She had begged Jimmy, whose original programme was now in ruins, for the next single act—"while the going was good," she said—and as this was her night, he could not refuse.

They clapped when they heard her name announced, and clapped still harder, cheered even, when she actually appeared. She gave them, with a wealth of by-play, that song of Inigo's about going home, and they loved every word and note and gesture of it all. Most of them had seen her before. She was the youngest, a favourite, and this was her night, so that there was every excuse for giving her a great reception. But if they had never set eyes on her before, it would have been just the same. This was indeed her night. She was entertaining them all at a birthday party. They were all old friends together, it seemed, and only because she happened to be the prettiest and gayest girl there, she was in the limelight and they were staring and listening in the dark. That first tight "Now or never" feeling had left her long ago; she knew the great Monte was there, but she no longer bothered her head about him; and she carried everything before her, swept everything dull and

heavy clean out of the world, with her gigantic rush of high spirits. Inigo, vamping idly at the piano, was amazed, almost frightened. This was Susie, everything—the adorable everything he knew so well—was there, but she was larger and brighter than life. The girl herself was lost in this public Susie, this tremendous Susie-for-everybody, who was so obviously ready to take possession of any stage, any audience, to charge into the very centre of that daft wonderland of the morning and early afternoon, that world of vast electric signs and photographers and interviewers and press agents and enormous cars and expensive lunches for everybody in glittering noisy rooms. All of it seemed hers now by right. She had only to lift a finger and they would all be gathering round her and up would go the spangled lights, spelling her name in the crazed empyrean of Shaftesbury Avenue. In a flash he saw even the formidable Ethel Georgia slinking away, a little faded, tired, when she appeared. It seemed to him that that wonderlandish world was closing round her already. He did not know whether he liked it or not. Something hurt, though there was sweetness in the wound. One moment he felt he wanted to stop playing, to seize her by the arm and rush her away into the dark, just to sit in a tram with her, take her back to dingy lodgings, drop into the old round of Sunday trains and dry sandwiches and little halls and companionable shabbiness. The next moment he wanted to go on and on, to play and play until she had laughed and pirouetted herself into being everything she thought she wanted to be, and all the good things were heaped before her, and he was—well, dodging about somewhere in the background, looking on at the spectacle of her gigantic, her immortal happiness. But then again—but what then? Oh, he didn't know. He seemed to have been up and doing for several weeks without a break of comforting brute senselessness, good old sleep. He must be tired. But he didn't feel tired, he felt drunk, a trifle mad. *Tiddly-iddly-om-pom, tiddly-iddly-om.* Quite mad, in fact—absolutely. *Pom-pom.*

Susie gave one encore, she gave two encores, and even then the riot was not subdued. There were some little parcels for her too, and some flowers, including a bouquet —a real Grand Opera sort of bouquet, something undreamed of in the pierrot world—that was handed down from the mysterious box. She tried to say something, but was far too excited and breathless. Jimmy hustled the others on for a concerted number and left her happy and gasping in the wings, where she received the congratulations of Mr. Oakroyd.

"I ought to go and sit down and be quiet in the dressing-room, Jess lad," Susie told him, "but I just can't. Look at this. Isn't it sweet? Oh!—I'm nearly bursting. What a night!"

"Champion!" cried Mr. Oakroyd, rising to heights of enthusiasm hardly known in Bruddersford. "Eh, that were a right treat, Soos lass. An' they tell me ther's one o' t'big men o' the the-ater business in t'house."

"There is," cried Susie. "And I expect him to come round any minute and say, 'Miss Dean, I've been looking for you for years. Open a week on Tuesday at two hundred and fifty pounds a week. If that's not enough, let me know.' Something like that. What d'you say?" But before he could say anything, she waltzed him round a few times.

"So that's it, is it?" he said, when she had let him go. "And what about poor owd *Good Companions?* We'll nivver see you ner more, unless we go up on a day trip and pay to go in. Never you mind, Soos lass," he went on, when it appeared she was about to break in, "you look after yersen and if yon feller does offer you ten pound a week to go up to London or owt like that, tak' it on. So long as there's nowt shameless about it, coming on naked and suchlike. You'll ha' to mind there, I'm thinking, for they're a bit of a foul lot i' London, they tell me. But if it's decent, tak' it. Eh, I'd right miss you if you went, I would an' all——"

"Darling!" cried Susie, who had been ready to laugh and cry all at once for some time, and now felt more like

it than ever. She took hold of his arm and squeezed it hard. "I think you're marvellous, Jess lad, and I'd miss you too. Let's run away to Canada together, shall we?"

"Eh"—a very long-drawn-out one this time—"ther's nowt I'd like better. We would have a do." He stopped for a minute to contemplate rapturously the "do" they would have, before returning to the world of fact. "But listen here. Never you mind about *t'Good Companions.* Tak' what's offered if yer can benefit yersen. 'Cos ther's bound to be a bust-up i' t'party afore so long. Summat's going to happen, I can feel it coming. Ay, you can laugh, but I've a right knack that way. When t'United won t'Cup, I said they would right from t'start that year, and they all laughed at me at t'mill, but I wer right. An' I'll tell you another thing," he added, taking breath.

"Go on, Mr. Old Moore," she said, laughing at him.

"I thowt ther wer going to be a right bit o' bother here to-night. An' I'm not so certain it's all ower yet, either."

"You mean that lot at the back?"

"That's right. I've had a look at 'em and wer talking to t'owd chap that looks after t'pit, an' yon lot's game for owt. Ther's summat wrong there, let me tell yer. I can't mak' it out at all, I can't. Here, Jimmy's wanting you to join in, afore t'interval."

So Susie went on again and helped to bring about a rousing curtain. Jimmy had cut the first half, perhaps in the hope that the roughs at the back of the pit would clear out at the interval and not come back, though for the last half-hour or more they had not made a sound. When the house lights went up, after the curtain had fallen, Inigo, peeping through with the excited Susie, had just time to see Mr. Monte Mortimer leaving his seat. Was he coming round to see them? Or was he slipping out for a drink? As the minutes passed and he did not appear, Inigo came to the conclusion that Monte had wanted a drink, a cheerful conclusion compared with Susie's, which was that he retired for good and all, in disgust. Just before it was time to begin again, however, they saw him back

in his seat, and Susie was able to have a peep at his distinguished Assyrian features.

"He doesn't look bad," she remarked. "I'd like to scream at him 'Well, what about it?' Wonder what he's thinking. Doesn't look as if he's thinking anything. Look, he's yawning. Oh, don't yawn. Fancy coming here and yawning!"

"Damn cheek, I call it," said Inigo. "He's probably eaten too much. He had enough lunch for five, and I'll bet he's been eating and drinking ever since."

"Pig! No, I won't say that. You never know, he might sort of—what d'you call it?—know what I'm saying. Please, Mr. Mortimer, I want a nice fat engagement. Thank you. Oh, this is awful! I feel sick. If he doesn't do anything about it, everything's spoilt, isn't it? I mean it'll be ghastly just going on in the old way. I wish it was time to begin again. I'm not going to look at him any more. There's nobody in that box now. I wonder who they are. Marvellous bouquet they gave me, and no name on it at all. It's a very handsome young millionaire—not too young, you know, not like you, Inigo—who's fallen madly in love with me. Hello, here we are."

"Well," said Jimmy, beaming at them all, "I thought we were in for it, one time——"

"Thought somebody else was," growled Joe. "Just let me catch one of them fellows, that's all——"

"Those fellows, Joe, not them fellows," his wife told him. "And you'll do nothing of the kind."

"It's all right now, though," Jimmy continued. "Got 'em all going in great style."

"A riot," Mr. Morton Mitcham observed gravely.

And a riot it proved to be, though not the kind of riot mentioned in the columns of *The Stage*. When the lights went down again, all the people in the pit were back in their places, but the policeman was not there. He had seen nothing to worry about, and so he had majestically departed during the interval, leaving behind him—alas!—a fine chance of promotion.

III

"Shurr-up!"

"Order, *please!*"

"Sh-sh-sh."

"Gerr-outcher!"

"Give order, *please!*"

"Send 'em out!"

"Sh-sh-sh."

"Give order, genelmen, *if you please!*"

"Ow! Ah-oo-er! Pur a sock in it!"

". . . behalf of my fellow artistes, like to appeal to those members of the audience at the back there to keep quiet (Here, here!), like them to remember that other people have paid their money and want to hear the show properly . . . (Turn 'em out!) . . . fair play . . . British sportsmanship . . . thanking you one and all . . ."

The audience loudly applauded this speech of Jimmy's, but the noise was even worse afterwards. Poor Mrs. Joe, imploring the Red Sun to sink in-toe the West (just as if she thought it was uncertain in its movements for once, and feared some cosmic catastrophe), could hardly be heard, for the people who were indignant at the constant interruptions were as noisy as the people who interrupted. In vain she paused between verses, a figure erect and contemptuous, the Duchess of Dorking standing before a revolutionary tribunal. The silence she waited for never arrived. With a glance of despair not unmixed with pleading, addressed to the shirt front and bare arm in the box, she plunged into her second song. She was a Highland lassie now, a passionate tragic creature of the moors and the glens, waiting and watching for our old acquaintance, Angus MacDonald. Would he or would he not, she asked in her deepest chest notes, come from his camp o'er the sea? Did she hear the call of the pibroch? Apparently she did, though to everybody else it sounded like the last despairing bleat ("Order, gents, *please!*") of the aged attendant in the pit. She also heard the marching of men,

but everybody else heard something like this too, a stamping of feet at the back. Yes, it was Angus Her Own coming home from the war. She asserted this triumphantly at the top of her voice, and even then she could hardly be heard. It seemed as if Angus was bringing the war home with him. Pale, trembling, she stalked off tragically at the end of her song, and did not return to face the uproar, though most of it was honest and admiring applause.

Meanwhile, it was taking Miss Trant and Mr. Oakroyd all their time to restrain Joe in the wings from descending into the auditorium and "knocking a few blasted heads together." When Mrs. Joe came off, however, he had to attend to her, for after smiling wildly and elaborately shrugging her shoulders and raising her hands, she suddenly burst into tears. "I've not been so—so—so insulted since that awful time at Grimsby," she sobbed, "when they were all drunk—and threw the fish." Joe, muttering that somebody was going to get something worse than fish, gave her all the support of his stalwart person, and finally she was persuaded to rest in her dressing-room, where Miss Trant administered eau-de-Cologne and soothing words. Four of them were now struggling fairly successfully through a noisy quartette, full of comic "business." The attendant in the pit had given up his task of restoring order in despair. One or two members of the audience, pugnacious men, had attempted to take over his duties, with the result that there were loud arguments at the back for some time, and once or twice the sound of a slight scuffle. The remainder of the audience was becoming very restive indeed. One of the loudest and most indignant members was no other than our friend, Mr. Monte Mortimer, whose professional sense of decorum was outraged by these constant interruptions, as well they might be, for he had heard nothing like it for years. If a few first-nighters in the gallery ventured a timid hiss or boo at Mr. Mortimer's productions, he filled the papers next day with wild talk of conspiracies and terrible threats. Now,

his was one of the loudest of the hushing voices, and every now and then he half rose from his seat and looked round, as if he were inclined to take charge of the proceedings himself.

"Leave it to me, Jimmy," Mr. Morton Mitcham whispered, with all the confidence of a man who has been four times round the world. "I've managed tougher crowds than this. Let's put on my conjuring act, with you gagging in the house."

There was something to be said for this. It meant that Jimmy would pretend to be a very rude member of the audience, who from the back of the pit would carry on an argument with Mr. Mitcham, who would finally ask him to step on the stage, along with some other and bonafide members of the audience, to "watch him closely." Mr. Mitcham was an old hand, and was clever at getting laughs at the expense of his assistants from the audience. This might do the trick, creating order out of deliberate disorder. Jimmy had some misgivings, but thought it was worth trying, and off he went to change his costume and then sneak round to the back, leaving Mr. Mitcham in possession of the stage. Mr. Mitcham began by playing the banjo, but soon gave that up. Joe brought on his conjuring apparatus for him, and the two of them started gagging.

"I shall now require a few members of the audience," Mr. Mitcham announced, in his harsh deep drawl, "to assist me and to prove to you, ladies and gentlemen, there is absolutely no deception."

This was the cue for Jimmy, at the back, to open the comic dialogue. But something went wrong, apparently, for all that could be heard from the stage was a real argument. Then Jimmy's voice was raised in genuine protest: "Here, half a minute, you chaps!" he was crying. "Here, what you doing? Let go."

"A few members of the audience, please," Mr. Mitcham was repeating.

This was where chaos broke in, and an ordered nar-

rative, even if it were possible, would no longer fit the occasion. There was a movement towards the stage, vague in the darkness. "House lights!" Mr. Mitcham hissed, but they did not come on. There was a door at the right of the proscenium that led directly through, a short flight of stone steps bringing you into the wings. It seemed some people from the back were making for that door. There was also a central gangway running through both pit and stalls, there being no barrier, only a thick cord, between them, and down this gangway came several figures, now moving forward, now scuffling. And Jimmy's voice was heard from this group, still raised in protest. So far, so good, but now comes chaos, bewildering alternations of light and darkness, hurtling fragments of event.

"Let go, can't you!"

"'Ere, what's the ruddy idea?"

"Turn 'em out."

"Lights up, there, you fools!"

"Oh, will you!"

And shouts from some of the men and screams from some of the women. There seemed to be a struggle going on in the gangway, not far from the stage now. Jimmy was in it.

Then a large figure sprang up from nowhere, charged into the scuffling group, and sent one or two men flying. It was Joe. "Oh, you get out of it," he was heard to bellow. And then somebody did get out of it. There was a crack; there was a thud; somebody had taken a full punch from the furious Joe. More shouts, screams, and cracks. That unconscious somebody, it seemed, was being lifted out of the way. Then the lights came on, uncertainly, as if they did not like it.

"My God!" cried Inigo, starting up from the piano. "It's Monte Mortimer." And it was. Mr. Mortimer had interfered in the dark; he had got in the way; he had received Joe's punch; and he was not beyond those voices, where there was peace. We shall never meet him again. Farewell, Monte!

Somebody was shouting for the curtain to be dropped; twenty people were roaring for the police; and about a hundred more were shouting at random. Out went the house lights again, suddenly this time. Next minute, the stage lights had vanished too. The whole place was in darkness, a black pandemonium.

"Hey!" Mr. Oakroyd had cried, as three or four of them came clattering up the steps and round the corner. A rough lot they looked, too. "What you doing here?"

"Coming on the stage," one of them had replied. But another had just put his lip out and growled "Gairrr away!"

"Nar, tak' your hook," he had told them, angrily.

Then he got a shove in the back that sent him banging against one of them, a big one. This fellow gave him another shove that sent him spinning. Then all the lights went out. Somebody had got at the switchboard. He jumped forward, bumped into a fellow, got a crack on the head, but was able to give somebody something to be getting on with. The stage-hand was shouting somewhere. So were a lot of other people. He charged at the switchboard, but people and things got in the way. Then he found himself grappling with somebody, got tripped up, went flying in the dark, with several people falling over him.

"Fire! Fire!" a voice shouted, not far away.

"Fire! Fire! Fire!" Innumerable voices took it up, voices rising to screams.

Desperately Mr. Oakroyd picked himself up. "There's no bloody fire," he was yelling, in despair.

"No fire," somebody was shouting on the stage. "Keep your seats please."

The uproar now was terrific, horrible. There were huge crashes all over the place. "Get them lights on," roared a voice. "The lights, the lights!" And from further away: "Fire! Fy-yer! Fy-yerr!"

Another dash for the switchboard. Somebody else making for it too. Joe. "Come on, Joe lad," cried Mr. Oak-

royd. Somebody there. Two of them. "Tak' that, yer——," from Mr. Oakroyd, who landed one in first, this time. The other fellow gave a yell, his companion a grunt, and Mr. Oakroyd grabbed a switch or two. The lights that came on now showed Joe leaping after one of the men; the other had dropped. Mr. Oakroyd dashed on to the stage, to shout that there was no fire. The place was like a madhouse. Everybody was shouting and screaming, pushing and struggling. "Keep your seats!" they shouted from the stage, he and Jimmy and Morton Mitcham and Inigo, with the women of the party beside them now, pale, amazed. But he had not been there a minute before all the lights but two or three, high up and giving the merest glimmer, went out again. That switchboard. He collided in the wings with a woman who had just dashed up the steps from the front, a large woman, screaming something—sounded like "Jerry." Must have been too, because the next moment, Jerry Jerningham appeared from nowhere, was immediately grabbed by this large woman, and whisked off, somewhere at the back. From somewhere too there came a series of crashes. Things were being overturned. Electric bulbs were going too. Chaps came jumping out of the big shadows, making off. They were still shouting "Fire!" somewhere. Mr. Oakroyd got some more lights on. There was a smell of burning too; it seemed to be coming over from the other side. He called to the others and hurried across. Plenty of smoke. It seemed to be coming from that pile of old curtain stuff there. He and Inigo got two extinguishers on it. No flame, but the smoke was worse, blinding and choking. Something rickety there too, wobbling a bit. Joe was shouting down from the top. He heard the swift rustle behind him. The curtain was coming down, moving by itself, it seemed, for he could not see anybody lowering it. A chap went tearing past. Wasn't that Joe coming down, still shouting? These big side pieces—part of the theatre's standard set, and very old—didn't seem any too safe. Here, they'd better look out. Something gave a nasty shake.

"Look out!" he yelled to them at the back. "Get out o' t'way, sharp!" Miss Trant, Jimmy, Susie, with her arms full of music, were still there. He shouted again, ran forward, waving his arms at them.

You would have thought the whole theatre had fallen in, it fell with such a crash, that piece of scenery. Susie and Mr. Oakroyd were untouched. Jimmy was sitting on the stage, groaning, his head in his hands. But Miss Trant was lying there, white and still. The police were coming now, were actually here. There was the clamour of a fire-engine coming from somewhere outside. Miss Trant never moved as they bent over her, crying her name.

IV

"Well, you've made a benefit of this all right," said the Inspector grimly. His audience was composed of Inigo and Joe, still in their stage costumes, which were torn and filthy, Mr. Oakroyd, all bruised and blackened, and two members of the staff of the Gatford Hippodrome. The rest had gone, most of them between half an hour and an hour ago. It was nearly an hour since Miss Trant had been taken away to the hospital, with Jimmy, still groaning, in attendance.

"What do they say at the hospital—about Miss Trant?" Inigo asked, shakily. He had never felt more tired in all his life. He could not stand on his feet any longer. He felt dizzy, sick.

"I'm getting that through for you," replied the Inspector. "I'll have word in a minute or two. You chaps had better be getting along home now. You're played out, I can see that. Meantime, I've got to be making out my report." He looked about him with a sardonic eye. The fire had not done very much damage; indeed, it was almost out when the fire-brigade arrived. Nevertheless, the Gatford Hippodrome looked a wreck. The stampede had left its traces on the body of the theatre, and the stage was a blackened and watery ruin. "This part of it's nothing," the

Inspector went on, "though I don't say it isn't bad enough. Nobody'll be giving a turn here for some time. It's life though, not property, that matters. There might have been dozens of lives lost—dozens, yes, scores—with people all trying to get out at once. Matter of fact, there isn't any so far, and doesn't look like being any. Lucky, I'll tell you, very lucky. Seven people injured, that's all the figure I've got—that's in the audience, not counting your two."

"It'ud ha' been all nowt, Inspector," said Mr. Oakroyd earnestly, "if they hadn't ha' gone an' shouted 'Fire'! like that. I knew what it'ud be. We tried to stop 'em."

"But there was a fire," said the Inspector.

"Nay, ther wasn't, not when they were shouting. It come after, did t'fire, and it were nowt when it did come. Me an' him put most on it out oursens, easy."

"That's true," said Inigo wearily.

"Well, who started it all?" said the Inspector.

"I've told yer," replied Mr. Oakroyd. "Chaps 'at came from back o' t'pit started it all. Turned t'lights off to begin wi', an' it must ha' been them as shouted 'Fire!'"

"Sure of it," said Joe, and explained what happened to him when all the trouble first began.

"We'll have to look into this," said the Inspector dubiously. "Pity they got away, that's all. Nothing to work on at all."

"Nay, you've got one on 'em, t'chap Joe an' me were sitting on so long," said Mr. Oakroyd. "Hey, sergeant, didn't you tak' yon chap wi' t'red scarf? He were one on 'em."

"That's right, sir," said the sergeant, coming up. "We got him all right. It's Tulley."

"Oh, it's Tulley, is it? We know him all right. An old friend of ours, Tulley is. What's he got to say?"

"Knows nothing about it, sir. Happened to be in the audience, he says, and was getting out this way."

"He's lyin'," Mr. Oakroyd declared.

"We'll see about that," replied the Inspector, who was still busy taking stock of the situation. He poked about for a few minutes and made some notes, while the tattered remnants of *The Good Companions* looked on listlessly. They said nothing, for there seemed to be nothing to say now until they had had news from the hospital. At last, however, a policeman arrived with the message, which he delivered into the Inspector's ear as if it were a state secret.

"Well, it's not so bad," said the Inspector, turning to them. "In fact, it's good. The lady's suffering from shock and a fractured arm, that's all. No need for anybody to worry——"

They gave huge sighs of relief.

"And your other friend—the little man, Nunn—only got a crack on the head. They're keeping him there overnight, but he'll probably be out to-morrow or the day after. He's all right, though there won't be any song-and-dance for him for a week or two, I should say."

Inigo found himself giggling in a helpless sort of way. Everything had been rather crazy for some time now, of course, but still he didn't want to giggle about it.

"You change your clothes and get to bed, my boy," said the Inspector. "Have a bite of food and a drink of something and then turn in, quick. You chaps too. Off you go. You can't do any more here. And, I say, don't leave the town until I've seen you again. I've got your addresses, haven't I? All right then, pop off."

They had changed and were just straggling off, like a little company of shipwrecked sailors, when they met Susie, who looked like a fantastic little ghost as she came through the stage door. She was still wearing her stage costume, though she had a big coat over it, and there were traces of make-up on her face, a pale ruin of rouge and tear stains.

"Have you heard?" she cried, and when they said they had, she explained she had just come from the hospital. "It's not so bad, is it?" she said, smiling wanly.

"Better ner like," Mr. Oakroyd agreed.

"Mrs. Joe's waiting for you at the digs, Joe," she went on. "She told me to tell you. And you'd to hurry up because she was going to see there was something hot for supper."

"Ther should be a bit o' summat for me an' all," remarked Mr. Oakroyd contemplatively. "I hadn't thowt owt about it, but I'm right peckish nar. Happen ther'll be a bit o' meat-and-tater pie warmed up. Yon landlady o' mine is great on meat-and-tater pie."

"Let's keep out of the main street," said Susie, first slipping a hand inside Joe's arm, then taking the expectant arm, Inigo's, on the other side, and squeezing them both a little. "We don't want anybody to see us, do we?" They trudged on in silence down the gloomy side-street. Doors were being slammed with a kind of savage finality. Somewhere not far away, a hoarse reveller was shouting:

"'E's a dee-ar old pal,
Ja-holly old pal,
But 'e opens 'is mouth tew wi-ide."

It was Mr. Oakroyd, who had just been considering, for the first time in true perspective, the whole daft evening, who broke the silence. "Well, by gow!" he began. "Nar who'd ha' thowt——"

But he was not allowed to say any more. "Don't start," said Susie hastily. "Just keep quiet, Jess lad. It's been a mess, an awful mess. I've cried enough to-night, I don't want to cry any more. And I don't want to talk about it now. There'll be plenty of time to talk about it all next week."

"Absolutely," said Inigo wearily.

"I dare say," said Joe. "Never mind, Susie. What's going to happen next week anyhow?"

"God knows!"

"I'm sorry, lass. I'll say ner more. I'll go on thinking about my bit o' meat-and-tater pie. We're not dead yet, though I seem to be stiff'ning a bit. Summat'll turn up."

So they went trudging on, as quiet as the four shadows in their grotesque dance on the pavement, lengthening and dwindling between the street lamps.

CHAPTER V

LONG, AND FULL OF SALVAGE WORK

I

"WELL, well!" cried the voice, though softly. "Well, well!"

"Is it the same?" asked the nurse.

"The very same," the voice replied. It had lost some of the deep rough burr it had had years ago, this voice, but there was no mistaking it. "No," it went on now, "I'll not do that. Let her have her sleep out."

Miss Trant, however, had already had her sleep out. She was awake now, although her eyes were still closed and she had not stirred. The sound of that first quiet but startled "Well!" had drawn her from some deep dreamless place into an upper region of flickering shadows, dreams and voices. Where was she? The hotel? The hospital? No. The Mirland Nursing Home. And it was Tuesday afternoon. She was back now in full consciousness, though all it offered her at the moment was a quivering brownish space and these two voices. And one of them was his, hardly changed at all.

She opened her eyes, which discovered a world very bright, solid, looking as if it had just been made. He was standing by the door. She was not surprised to see him. She had not been surprised to hear his voice. It was as if she had spent years and years being surprised *not* to see him and hear his voice, and that that state of things had now quietly stopped.

"Hello!" she cried, feebly.

He came forward, smiling. He looked older, of course,

but not strangely so. On the contrary, he looked more himself, as if this were the age he had been aiming at when she had known him, years ago. "Miss Elizabeth Trant," he said, with deliberation. Nobody else would have said it like that.

"Doctor Hugh McFarlane," she replied, giving him her hand.

The nurse nodded brightly at the pair of them and departed.

"I thought you were asleep," he said, sitting down beside her, "and I didn't mean to disturb you."

"You recognised me then?"

"I did," and left it at that. He was just the same. He was capable of leaving the most gigantic gaps in conversation, never dreamt of filling them in with the nearest rubbish.

"How did you know I was here? Did you—read about us in the paper?" For the local paper had been very excited about last Saturday's doings at the Hippodrome.

"No, I never saw a word about it in the paper," he replied. "That would be the paper here though, wouldn't it? I only see *The Times* and *Glasgow Herald*, and there wasn't anything in them about it."

"I should hope not."

"But I did hear something about it," he continued, thrashing the thing out in the same old way. "Then I had to come here to see a patient of mine and saw your name, so I came to see if it was the Miss Elizabeth Trant I knew."

She could not resist it. "I thought you would have forgotten all about me by this time," she murmured.

He shook his head gravely. "Not at all. I hadn't forgotten you. I recognised you as soon as I came in. You haven't changed much, even with your little accident too. Subnormal now, aren't you? Yes, you would be."

"I thought I saw you—in a car—the other day," she told him. "One day last week it was, about ten miles out of Gatford. I came to the conclusion that it couldn't be you, but now I think it must have been."

"Now exactly when was that? Last week, you say. What time of day would it be?" He brought out, quite solemnly, a little pocket-book.

"Afternoon, sometime," she replied vaguely. "It was—let me see—you were on the main road going out of Gatford—it seems ages ago now. Oh, it doesn't matter, does it?"

"It must have been last Tuesday, I think," he said, frowning hard at his little book. "To-day week. I'd called here. Was I driving a red two-seater? I was? Then it was me you saw. Isn't that curious? I wish I'd known you were here."

Miss Trant hesitated for a moment, evaded his level glance, then said hastily: "As a matter of fact, we—I—tried to find out if you were here, just to make sure. But your name wasn't in the telephone book. And doctors are always in the telephone book, aren't they?"

"Not if they've just arrived," he said, smiling at her. "There hasn't been time to put me in the telephone directory yet. I've just entered into partnership with Doctor Heard—he's a man of some age and is giving up the practice soon—out there at Waterfield on the main road. I shouldn't have come here but I've been doing some work on the parathyroid glands, and that meant being near Masters in London or Hudson here in Gatford. So I came here to work with Hudson. You'll have heard of him?"

"I'm afraid I haven't," she said, smiling back at him. "It's terrible, but you people do the most wonderful things and we never hear anything about you."

He stroked his long bony face. "I suppose that is so, though I can't complain myself because I haven't done anything wonderful yet. But how did you come to be here? I never knew you had any inclinations towards the stage."

She laughed. "I hadn't and I haven't. It's all rather ridiculous, though I must say it doesn't seem very funny just now." And she told him, briefly, what had happened since her father died. Sometimes he stared at her in blank amazement, and sometimes he gave a little low chuckle.

It made her feel as if she were describing a visit to the moon.

"And now," she concluded, "don't ask me what I'm going to do, because I don't know."

"I do. You're going to stay here until that arm's mended and you've had a nice rest and your nerves are quiet again." He still called them "nairrves." He still brought out those huge vowels and smashing consonants, and when he turned his face towards the light there was still that glint of hair about his cheekbones. "And if there's anything that must be done, let me do it for you."

"Oh, I can't worry you with my silly affairs. I'm sure you've plenty to do, too much, as it is."

"Not at all. I don't say I haven't plenty to do—we're always busy, you know—but still an old bachelor like me has time for anything."

"You haven't married then?"

"No." He stopped, and fingered his chin. "Up to now, I seem to have been too busy. It's a thing that takes time, I suppose, getting married."

"Well, you mustn't call yourself an *old* bachelor, not to me. You see, I happen to remember you're only two years older than I am, and I don't want to be told I'm old too."

"Two years older! That's it exactly. Now who'd have thought you would have remembered that!" he cried, lighting up and altogether more animated now. "You've as good a memory as I have."

"I remember some things very well."

"Och, so do I." He was charging in quite recklessly now, without thinking where he might be going. "I've never heard a mention of that old rock of Gibraltar without thinking of you—and the Colonel," he added, hastily.

"Which of us reminds you of Gibraltar?" she inquired, laughing at him. "Not me, I hope. It must have been my father. I think you were always rather frightened of him."

"Of the Colonel! Not the least bit. It was you I was frightened of, if you must know."

"Me!" This was too absurd. A memory of that large, masterful, dogmatic young Scot, setting her right about everything, suddenly invaded her mind. "I'm sure that's not true. I never knew anybody who bullied me quite so much."

"Ay, I was raw then, a raw lad."

Tea came in at that moment. "I've brought a cup for Doctor McFarlane," the girl remarked, setting down her tray by the side of the bed.

"Thank you," said Miss Trant. "You will stay, won't you? You'll have to pour it out for both of us, I'm afraid. I can't manage it with this arm all tied up."

If she imagined he would be very awkward and clumsy with the teapot, she was wrong. He did it all very deftly indeed, and she noticed now—and this was a new discovery—that his long bony hands were very finely controlled, sensitive. And then—it came in a flash while she was finishing her first piece of bread-and-butter—she suddenly felt how incredible it was that he should be actually there, the whole enormous lump of him, so tremendously like himself, quietly sharing her tea. And yet one part of her, so small and remote that it could not be said to have a voice, refused to see anything incredible in all this, would not even be faintly surprised, but settled itself down, as if this were the natural order of things. They talked easily now, chiefly about the present, Gatford and *The Good Companions*, and so forth. The afternoon, itself a pale flower of the early spring, filled the room with washed and delicate light, called out anew the scent of the daffodil and narcissus, and was ecstatically busy with rumours of a fragrant and budding world outside.

"And will you be going on with this—er—stage business?" he asked her. When he saw her smile a little ruefully and shake her head, his face cleared. "There's nothing wrong with it, of course," he continued, "but it seems a daft sort of thing for somebody like yourself to be doing."

"The moment they can get on without me, I shall give

it up," she confessed. "It's been—well, fun, if you like. Anyhow, I wouldn't have missed it for anything. But for some time now I've been thinking I ought to give it up. You see, to begin with, it's impossible for me to take it seriously——"

"I should think not," cried Dr. McFarlane heartily, with the air of a man to whom a troupe of pierrots are no more than so many buzzing flies.

"But that's not fair to them, you see. It's their world, their life. I don't want to let them down now. It looked as if everything was going to be splendid. We were making money, and I was getting back all I'd lost. The clever young ones all thought they might get engagements in town, because some big revue man came down on Saturday to see them."

"Was the row too much for him?"

"Oh no, worse than that. It's a miserable business for them, poor dears—but it's rather funny, I can't help laughing. It seems he came and got mixed up somehow in a dreadful scrimmage in the audience, and Joe, who didn't know who he was and probably didn't care, having thoroughly lost his temper, hit this man terribly hard, so hard that he had to be carried out."

"Well, well! A knock-out, eh? I wouldn't have thought an actor-laddie could have done that."

"Yes, but then Joe was once a heavy-weight boxer—in the Navy."

"Ah!" said Dr. McFarlane, who apparently knew something about heavy-weight boxers in the Navy. "He might well do that then."

"And now they're all heart-broken, though they pretend not to be when they come here to see me. The young ones feel they have lost their chance, and one of them, Jerningham, seems to have disappeared. Nobody has seen him since Saturday night. One of the older ones—Mr. Nunn, the comedian—has his head bandaged up and won't be fit to act for a week or two. And the others don't know what is going to happen to them. We had taken the Hippodrome

for another week, but of course we couldn't play in it even if it were fit to use."

"It certainly isn't that, from what I hear," he said grimly.

"That's the awful thing," she told him. "I'm responsible for all that damage."

He stared at her in horror and dismay. "You mean they'll come on to you to pay for all that?"

"I believe so. The Hippodrome people are going to claim it all from me. It's a wicked shame because it wasn't our fault at all, and we've already suffered for it. And just as I thought I should get back most of the money I'd lost, this comes along. Oh, it's a miserable business. And the others are absolutely heart-broken about it. They feel it's their fault, though it isn't at all, of course. It's mine, if it's anybody's——"

"Don't pay a penny piece," he cried, rising from his chair. Because a man has been working hard on parathyroid glands, and in addition has contrived to remember a girl he once knew on a voyage years ago, that does not mean that he cannot be appalled at the thought of good money being paid out like that. It was a prospect to make hundreds of McFarlanes turn in their graves. It now made this McFarlane stride up and down the room. "You've heard nothing definite yet?" he asked, finally.

"No, not yet," she replied, smiling rather wanly. She suddenly felt tired now.

He stopped, looked at her, then quietly sat down again. "You're tired now, Elizabeth?" he said, not taking his eyes off her face.

It coloured faintly. "I believe I am."

"Should I have said 'Miss Trant'?"

"No, of course not," returning his steady look with wide candid grey eyes.

"Too much talking. It's my fault."

"Then I shall have to report you to Doctor Mason, Hugh. But don't go for a minute. Let me talk a little

longer and then I shall feel better. What do you think I ought to do? I had thought of asking my brother-in-law—he's a solicitor in town—to come up and try and straighten it all out for me, but he and Hilda, my sister, are in the South of France. And even if they weren't, somehow I don't want the family here, crowing over me. Then I thought of asking Mr. Truby, he's my own solicitor at Cheltenham, to see what he could do, but he's—well, I don't feel he'd be much good. He probably thinks I'm mad."

"If it's a matter of taking to the law, I don't mean in court, but just being represented, then a local man is what you want, a man who knows what goes on in this town. I know a solicitor here—he's a patient of mine—of the name of Gooch, a fat fellow but sharp as a needle. I'll go and talk to him about it, and do what I can myself at the same time. And all you've got to do is to lie here quietly, not seeing your actor friends too often, just making your mind easy, reading a book or two——" He broke off, and regarded her quizzically. "Do you still devote yourself to those romances and historical novels you used to like so well?"

"Yes. I don't read quite so many as I used to do—there aren't good enough ones to go on with—but I haven't tired yet."

"Do you remember my telling you I thought them awful trash? I was a raw then, if ever a lad was. I've been ploughing my way through Walter Scott whiles, and there's a great deal of human nature in those Waverley Novels of his. He'd have made a fine general practitioner, Sir Walter would."

"There! You're coming on, Hugh."

He gave a short confused laugh. "No, I'm going on. I'll be looking in to-morrow if I can at all. If not, the next day for certain. That is, if you would like to see me."

"Of course I should like to see you. I didn't think, though, you'd be able to get here again as early as that. Is —er—your patient here worse?"

"Ay," he replied, with only the ghost of a twinkle to

show that a joke was in progress, "poor fellow, he seems to have taken a turn for the worse since this afternoon. So he'll need an early return visit." He rose and took her hand. "It's been a strange meeting this. I didn't think you'd have remembered."

"It was clever of you to recognise me at once, like that, when I was asleep too."

Having brought off one joke, there was no holding him now. "I won't say I remembered your face, Miss Elizabeth Trant," he said solemnly, "but from the way you were lying, the sterno-mastoid muscle was prominent, and I thought I remembered the look of that."

"What! Where? You don't—— Oh, I see. You are absurd. Very well, Doctorrr H-ew McFarrrlane, it was your terrible accent—an' only that—ah rrememberred. Goodbye, Hugh. And if you can do anything to prevent me from having to throw all my money away here in Gatford, I shall be awfully grateful."

Looking very grave again, at the thought of money being thrown away, he stood before her and declared with emphasis that he would do something about it. He was wearing a good suit—and was a far smarter figure than the bony young man she had known before—but it wanted brushing in places and there were one or two deplorable little stains and burns here and there. And his tie, of course, was monstrous. But greying hair suited him; he was almost handsome now.

"Fancy Doctor McFarlane being such an old friend!" cried the nurse afterwards. She was removing things very deftly, but as she spoke she kept an eye on her patient's face. Her duties compelled her to see life chiefly in terms of that rickety machine, the body, so it is not surprising that her hobby should have been human interest. Her next "Fancy!", which was not long in coming, had quite a note of triumph in it. Evidently things were looking up in the Mirland Nursing Home.

II

"You've not had a reply?" cried Susie.

"I have," Inigo replied, coming into the room. It was some time after eleven on the Wednesday morning. Susie had been dusting her sitting-room, which was also her landlady's parlour, in a fashion that fluctuated between the dreary and the dreamy. Ever since Saturday night, she had felt lost.

"It's not from Monte Mortimer himself," Inigo went on, speaking rather carefully, as if he thought he was a solicitor or some one of that kind. "It's from his secretary."

"That's all the same. Hurry up, idiot, and tell me what he says. You're so *slow,* Inigo." Then she plomped down into a chair. "It's a washout, isn't it? I can see it is. Go on, though."

"It's a letter and from the secretary," said Inigo, sitting down and taking out the sheet of paper. "This is what it says: Dear Sir, I have communicated your yesterday's wire to Mr. Mortimer, who is away from the office at present, and he requests me, in reply, to tell you to go to the devil. He also requests me to add that any further communication from you or any other member of your troupe will be regarded as coming from there and will not receive any reply whatever. Yours truly, J. Hamilton Levy, Secretary. And that," Inigo added, with a poor attempt at nonchalance, "is that."

"Let me have a look at it," Susie commanded, and then read it through herself. Having done that, she crumpled it fiercely and hurled it into the fire. "And to think I've been sorry for that—that object—for the last three days! Mean beast! I hope Joe's punch knocked him silly. I don't care, I do."

"Well, it did, my dear," said Inigo, "hence this colossal snub, absolutely. Looks to me as if he's still off duty."

"I wouldn't have minded so much if he hadn't been so

Smart Alecky about it. There's no need for him to try to be funny. His next revue'll need all the gags he can ever think of. Anyhow, he must be a rotten manager or he'd never let a thing like that stop him from getting in some good new talent. If I was running a show, I wouldn't care if I got fifty biffs, I'd engage people who could do something."

"I'm awfully sorry, Susie," he began.

"Don't be silly. It's not your fault. It isn't anybody's fault really, and it certainly isn't yours. It's a washout, that's all, and the best thing I can do is to remember it's twice daily on the pier, or if fine at the pierhead and if wet in the shelter, that's my programme—if I'm lucky, because it's boiling down to that now, when you come to think of it. Hell! Give me a cigarette. No, don't, thanks. I don't want one."

"You ought to smoke a pipe," he said, lighting his. "By the way, I saw Jimmy this morning——"

"Is he better?"

"Practically. Head still hums a bit, and says he's dizzy when he tries to walk about. He won't be fit for work for a week or two. But what I wanted to say was, Mamie Potter's gone."

"Thank God! She wasn't much good anyhow, and she's brought us nothing but rotten luck. Thinks we're not good enough for her now, I suppose?"

"Something like that. Anyhow, she's gone. And nobody seems to know anything about Master Jerningham."

"Oh, he's pushed off too, I expect," said Susie, who was clearly anxious to relieve her feelings. "He would! He'll look after himself all right—Ai give you mai ward."

"I dunno. He may turn up again, babbling about his trousers as he did last time. Where was that? Tewborough, wasn't it? Gosh! the holes we've been in, Susie!"

"It's nothing to the hole we're in now, laddie," she said darkly. "We're in a mess, busted absolutely—as our sweet young pianist says. There's poor Miss Trant in a nursing home, and though she's sweet about it, she must be fed up

to the teeth with the lot of us. They say she'll have to pay for all the damage too. Well, she's had enough of it, you can bet. No more *Good Companions* for her. That means we shan't have a cent to go on with. If she offered us any money, I wouldn't take it. Not after all she's done and had to pay out."

"Well, I've got a spot, you know," he remarked.

"Keep your spot, my child. I'm coming to your part in it soon. Then Potter's gone. That doesn't matter, but still it means we'll have to get another soubrette. Jerry's gone too, and that's really awkward. You wouldn't get another light comedian as good—not for C. P. work—if you advertised till all was blue. Then Jimmy's not fit for work yet. We'd have to put in old Jess as a Yorkshire comedian. Wouldn't he be marvellous! It's all right laughing, but—oh, it's murder. I saw myself up in town by this time, signing contracts like mad, looking for a flat. What a hope! And a week ago I was sniffing at Bournemouth. Bournemouth! It wouldn't look at us now. Two-night stands are all we're fit for, with a return visit to Rawsley the event of the season. Susie Dean. A riot of Sandybay! Front chairs one-and-tenpence! Patronise the pierrots, girls and boys! Oh, hell—oh!—oh——"

"Susie!" He jumped out of his chair.

She shook her head fiercely, her thick dark bobbed hair swinging. Then she touched his hand for a moment and pushed him back. "No, sit down, idiot. We're both idiots. I work myself up in the most ghastly way these days. It must be because I'm so excited inside all the time, have been for days."

"I know," said Inigo sympathetically. He was sitting down again now, but his hands were stretched out in front of him, as if it was impossible to restrain them from reaching out to her.

"You don't know. You don't know anything about it." She was smiling mistily. "O lord! where's my handkerchief? Wait a minute. Now then, I've not finished yet. There's you."

"Me! What about me? I'm all right."

"You're not. To begin with, you're absurd, and always will be. No, don't start saying you're not, because that's not what I'm going to talk about. You went up to Felder and Hunterman's on Saturday, they heard your stuff, and what's his name—you know——"

"Pitsner?"

"That's right. Well, Pitsner wanted your songs, didn't he, just as that ape Monte Mortimer did?"

"He did. I won't say he was keen, because I don't believe that man was ever keen about anything. He's got a sort of 'But she is in her grave, and oh the difference to me!' look about him, Master Pitsner. Still, he wanted them all right."

"Well, there you are. Pitsner didn't get a punch from Joe, you know."

"True," Inigo murmured. He knew what was coming and was hoping to dodge it. "Pitsner didn't. But I've no doubt at all that something could be arranged, if you feel he ought to have one too. He could come down here for it, or perhaps one of us might go up there——"

"Don't be funny," she told him wearily. "You're not bad until you start being funny. Then you make me feel sick. Let's talk sense. You know he'll take those songs like a shot. And you know—or you ought to know, by this time—you can make bags of money up there turning out these things. Well, that's where you're going."

"You mean—I ought to clear out too?"

"Of course! The sooner the better!"

"But I don't want to."

"I dare say," she cried. "Because I'm not going, eh? I know your little game. You want to stay with us, going the old round, thumping out the old stuff, and looking at me over the top of the piano with the love-light in your eyes. For her sake alone he—thingumtybobbed—renounced wealth and fame. Love was his guiding star. Came the dawn. Yeogh!" Here she gave a very unladylike imitation

of acute sickness. "What do you think you are—a little hero from Hollywood? Out you go, laddie. Honestly, you don't want to go trailing round another year—Rawsley, Dotworth, Sandybay, Winstead, Haxby, Middleford, and Tewborough—my God!"

"Oh, I don't know," said Inigo, examining the bowl of his pipe with unnecessary interest. "Seeing England and all that. On t'road—as our friend, Master Oakroyd, says. It's the sort of experience that might be very useful to a man of letters——"

"Man of letters!" Susie made a number of uncomplimentary noises.

Inigo flushed and kicked out a foot at nothing in particular. "Shut up, Susie. I will write something decent some day, you see if I don't."

Her dark eyes rested on his sulky boy's face for a moment, and lost their hard brilliance. "Sorry! I don't know anything about it. I only know about silly songs, and you're marvellously clever at them. Anyhow, the point is—no self-sacrifice stuff. You've got to clear out of this mess."

"But you see, there's no self-sacrifice stuff about it," he explained quietly and slowly, while he examined, with what was apparently strong distaste, a large photogravure bearing the title *On the Road to Gretna Green.* "I want to be where you are, as I've told you before."

To this Susie made no reply. She looked into the fire, and they were both silent for a minute or two. "But after all," she said, finally, "if you want to do something for me, you ought to clear out and get up to London. Look what you did last Saturday."

"That's true," he cried, brightening. "That's the place to work it from." He paused, thinking it over. "I don't know, though. I'd have a pop at it, of course, but last Saturday's effort was gigantic cheek, absolutely, and I don't know if I could drag out any more Monte Mortimers. Still, you could slip up, couldn't you?"

She nodded, then frowned at the fire. "It's a mess. Everything's got into a mess. I expect you must think

sometimes I'm an awful little hard nut, always on the make. No, listen," as he began to protest. "But something nags at me inside telling me to get on quick. It's a sort of feeling I have about my father and mother. I've told you about it before, haven't I? As if it was because they had such a rotten time. And I feel I can't wait long. It's all right people saying 'Oh, you're young. Plenty of time!'—that sounds all right—but there isn't. If nothing happens, I'll get stale soon. I know I will. I oughtn't to, but there you are. I expect I haven't the guts to keep on and keep it up."

"That's rot. I see what you mean, absolutely, but it's rot about not having the guts. You've guts enough for ten."

She laughed, came over to him, and twisted a finger in his lock of hair. "Awful, isn't it? We sound like a butcher's shop. Let's talk about something else."

"By the way," he began. "Ow! That hurts. Look here, creature, if you want to know what to do with your hands——"

"I don't, thank you," letting him go.

"Pity," he grumbled. "However, I was going to say, I've just remembered that Saturday night was your benefit."

"You don't mean to say you'd forgotten that?"

"No, not exactly. What I meant was, I'd forgotten you got the money. How much was it, and what have you done with it, and so on and so forth?"

"I haven't done anything with it, idiot. Matter of fact, I don't know exactly how much it all comes to yet, but anyhow I'm not taking it. Of course not, don't be silly! How can I? Here's Miss Trant going to be run in for hundreds and hundreds. I can't possibly take anything."

"No, I suppose not," he replied, poking his face meditatively with the stem of his pipe. "Gosh! I'd forgotten about that."

"You're lucky! That's all part of the hellish mess. I'm going to see Miss Trant this afternoon. I think I'll

ask Mrs. Joe to come too. At times like this, us girls must stick together, my child."

They looked at one another, laughed, then carefully explained that they were really very miserable. And indeed they were about as depressed as it was possible for two such lively, youthful, optimistic souls to be. It was all the worse because there was nothing for them to do.

"Well," said Inigo at length, after wandering vaguely about the room, "I suppose I must be thinking about a spot of food. I'm having lunch out somewhere. Coming with me?"

"I don't feel like facing *Ye Jollie Dutche,*" she told him. "I think I'll tea-and-egg it here. Hello, what's that?"

"That, my dear," he replied, at the window, "is a car. And it's stopping here."

"Let me have a look. I knew it was. I felt it was. I've seen that car before somewhere. Something's going to happen, Inigo. It is, I know it is."

"What?"

"I don't know. Come away from the window or you might spoil it. No, we must pretend now we don't care, else it might stop happening at the last minute. I've always felt that, haven't you? There you are, a knock."

"Probably the doctor or somebody like that."

"It can't be. I'm sure it isn't."

And it wasn't. The landlady's head appeared and announced that a shover had called with a message for Miss Dean and for Mr. Jollifant too if he was here, which he was as her own eyes could see for themselves, and she would send it in to give it to them.

Susie recognised the chauffeur at once, and we recognise him too, having met him once on the pier at Sandybay and then again, one Sunday afternoon, outside Hicklefield. Yes, it is Lawley, Lady Partlit's chauffeur.

"And you're to come round to the Victoria Midland Hotel for lunch, Miss," he explained. "And you, sir, too. I was going round to your rooms, but this has saved me

the trouble. And I had to tell you that it was specially important, and they would be expecting you as soon as you could get round."

"They?" cried Susie. "Who are the others? Yes, we'll come, won't we, Inigo? But what's it all about?"

"Well," said Lawley, grinning, "it's a bit of a surprise, Miss. You'll soon see."

Susie looked at him a moment with widening eyes, then flashed a glance that might have meant a thousand things at Inigo, and bolted, screaming as she went, "Back in a minute!"

"Not so blowy as it has been," remarked Lawley coolly to Inigo, "but still on the cold side, if you ask me."

III

They both jumped and spoke, but Susie's cry was a second quicker than Inigo's.

"Married!"

"Yes, quite a surprise, isn't it?" said the lady who had once been a Partlit. She glittered and jangled and flashed before their startled eyes; her little round mouth looked as if it would never be shut again; her big staring eyes were now dancing with happiness; and though she still resembled a cockatoo, neither cage nor jungle had ever seen a cockatoo so excited, so triumphant. "And only this very morning. What a rush, my dear! I haven't breathed since Saturday, that horrible, horrible night. Yes, I've heard all about it, such a business! If I'd been a second later getting him away, I really think I should have died. At the time, of course, I could only think about him, but I've thought about you all since and felt so sorry. And poor Miss Trant too! But aren't you going to—or is that too late?"

"Of course we are," cried Susie. "It's lovely, and I'm sure you'll both be marvellously happy."

"Absolutely," muttered Inigo, who was still rather dazed.

"Now isn't that nice! Of course it's taken you com-

pletely by surprise. I knew it would," the bride rattled on. "And now, my dear, you must be ready for lunch. I think I'll ring the bell. He should be here any minute now. Telephoning, you know. We haven't had a single moment to spare since Monday morning, it's been such a rush. There he is, I think." She flew to the door. "Here we are, darling, and they were both so surprised—I knew they would be. Isn't it amusing?"

Susie was the first again. "Marvellous, Jerry!" She was busy shaking his hand. "I'm so glad. I hadn't any idea what was happening."

For one wild moment, Inigo, who had not yet come to his senses, saw himself stepping forward to congratulate Jerningham on becoming Lord Partlit or something of that kind. It seemed incredible that Partlit should be merged into Jerningham. "Many happy returns," he stammered. "I mean—you know—best wishes and all that."

"Tharnks, Susie. Tharnks, Inigo," said Jerningham gravely and without the flicker of an eyelid. He was more dignified, more beautiful, than ever, but his accent was also more fantastic. That alone had been unsettled by these momentous events; strange at any time, it was now wildly alien; and every sentence he spoke heaped up the mangled syllables. "Glard you could cem on to lernch."

"And we've got news for them, haven't we, darling?" cried his wife, who looked even more excited and happy now that he was here, as if there had been just a slight possibility before that he might never come back from the telephone.

"I should think you have news," said Susie, smiling and being tremendously woman-to-woman.

"Oh, but that's not all, my dear, I assure you. Lots of surprises for you to-day. Isn't Mr. Memsworth coming, darling? Lunch is ready."

"Raight, he won't be lorng," replied Jerry. "He's jerst petting through a call to tawn."

Susie glanced sharply at Inigo. "What have we here?" this glance inquired, but did not stay for an answer. A

waiter arrived with cocktails, and for the next few minutes they all sipped and chatted, with one eye on the door. The table was laid for five, so evidently Mr. Memsworth was to be of the party. It had quite a festive appearance, though the room itself, the only small private dining-room in the hotel, seemed to have given up hope of provincial social life about 1892. But what the Victoria Midland Hotel could do, it was obviously about to do for Mr. and Mrs. Jerningham.

At last, Mr. Memsworth made his entrance. It happened that there was a waiter on each side of the door when he appeared, but there ought to have been at least twenty, to say nothing of an orchestra. Mr. Memsworth, however, contrived at once to create an atmosphere in which two waiters looked like twenty. The moment he stalked in, with his "Sorry to keep you waiting" in a rich baritone that went straight to the back of the dress-circle, Susie realised in a flash it was *the* Memsworth, the great Memsworth, one greater than Monte Mortimer, and known in the profession as "The Emperor" or, more familiarly, perhaps ironically, as "The Emp." This was partly a tribute to his managerial powers, for he was the greatest despot in the musical-comedy world, and partly a tribute to his actual presence, his terrific style. Unlike most manager-producers, Mr. Memsworth had been an actor himself, having for years played "leads" in musical comedy. Those were the days when the scene of every musical comedy was set in some vague Central European state, when every leading juvenile was a prince in hussar uniform and every principal comedian a baron with a red nose, a squeaky voice, and a passion for ladies' maids, when every stage was noisy with heel-clicking, hussar choruses, and stentorian announcements of "His Highness, Prince Michael of Slavonia." Night after night, year after year, Mr. Memsworth had been some Highness or other, with the result that the manner had grown upon him; he could not divest himself of kingship. And now that he was a manager-producer—and a very successful one, having a sound knowledge of the public

taste, an eye for talent, and a very good head for business—he still made princely exits and entrances, patted people on the back as if he were bestowing an order upon them, and laughed in that hearty manner only possible to great public personages. The fashion in musical comedy had changed—and he had been one of the first to recognise the fact—but Slavonia, with its soldiers and soubrettes, its waltz-time and impossible scenery, lived on in him. And now, as he came forward to the luncheon table, it seemed strange that he was not followed by two files of baritone dragoons.

Susie nearly choked when she was introduced—or rather, presented—to him. She knew all about him. The Emp. himself—here in Gatford! But then, of course, Lady Partlit—Mrs. Jerningham—had something to do with West End theatres. She remembered that talk in the hotel outside Hicklefield. Those were Memsworth's theatres too. It was obvious now. Jerry had married her so that he could star in Memsworth's productions—something like that. "And you're on in this, Susie," she told herself, nearly bursting with excitement.

Inigo was quite cool, for the simple reason that he did not know who Memsworth was, except that he seemed the nearest thing one could ever get in this lower world to Prince Florizel of Bohemia.

They had not been sat down long when Mr. Memsworth looked gravely from one to the other of them, and, raising a fork, commanded silence. "Miss Dean, Mr. Jollifant," he began, in deep, solemn tones, "the other night I had the pleasure of seeing your show here."

"When?" gasped Susie.

"On Saturday night," he told her.

"And I was there too," the bride put in. "Wasn't I, darling? And a terrible night it was too, my dear."

"It was you in the box," cried Susie.

"Of course it was. It was all going to be such a nice surprise. Mr. Memsworth had to see me on business, and I said to him 'You must come and see these clever people'

and he laughed—this was on the telephone—you did laugh, didn't you, Mr. Memsworth?"

"I believe I was rather amused," the Emperor admitted. "But then who wouldn't have been, dear lady? I mean, in my position. New talent in Gatford is not an impossibility—there are no impossibilities in our profession—but it's—er—an improbability. I think you'll agree with me there."

"Absolutely," said Inigo heartily. He was enjoying Mr. Memsworth and so thought that this was the least he could do.

"But though I laughed," the great man continued, very impressively, "I came, I saw—and I was conquered."

Inigo gave a sudden gurgle. "I'm sorry. But I couldn't help thinking about Monte Mortimer, who came and saw and was conquered too."

"And I hope he's still feeling it," said Susie.

The others stared at them.

"Mai dar Jollifant," said Jerningham, raising his exquisite eyebrows, "whort is all this about?"

"Ah, Monte," the Emperor murmured. "So you know Monte, do you? A very able fellow, very able—in his own line of business."

"You see," cried Susie, "he was there on Saturday too—to have a look at us."

"What!"

Susie and Inigo began explaining together, and contrived to tumble out the story between them.

Mr. Memsworth roared with laughter. It was as good as a baritone solo. "But do you mean to say he was laid out?" he demanded. "He was? Right under my nose too. My dear people, I'd have given pounds, pounds, to have seen it. Monte! On the jaw, I think you said?" The room shook with his imperial mirth. "Waiter, the champagne. We must drink to this, we really must. Oh, why didn't I know at the time. You made him come up and then he was knocked out. Monte! What a story! Next time I see Monte at the club, I shall go up to him, look him in the eyes, and then simply say one word—Gatford. Monte will

be at my mercy. Why, if this story got about——!" Mr. Memsworth raised his eyes, his hands, towards Heaven, and then drank some champagne. "But, Miss Dean, Mr. Jollifant, this has its serious side," he went on, solemn again now. "Are you tied up with him in any way?"

"He told us to go to the devil," said Susie. And Inigo explained about the letter they had received that very morning.

"What a rude man!" cried Mrs. Jerningham.

"It's the Oriental," said Mr. Memsworth, "the Oriental, dear lady. Monte is not a sportsman—never was, never will be. I know him well, in business and outside it. A very able fellow, as I said before—I don't know anybody who can put on a revue of the medium class, semi-intimate, semi-spectacular—but not a gentleman." He turned to Susie and Inigo. "So that leaves you free. No more Monte! Well, I don't mind admitting that I think you're lucky. I don't say that Monte couldn't have done something for you. He could have done a great deal. He's made one or two good people. But I can do more—believe me, much more. I can put you—there."

"And will, won't you, Mr. Memsworth?" said Mrs. Jerningham, who was evidently not only happy herself but anxious that everybody else should be happy. A bird of Paradise, not a cockatoo.

"I will try, if these—if our friends here—will allow me," he replied majestically. "As I say, I saw the show on Saturday, and to my astonishment, I discovered that here—playing Gatford—in a troupe whose name is entirely unknown to me—are three young people of real, quite undoubted talent." He paused, holding them with his eye. "First, a young comedienne, who can sing, who can dance, who can act, who has—and this is the great thing—charm *and* personality. If she has ambition, as I'm told she has——"

"I'm bursting with it," Susie told him breathlessly.

He bowed. "So I believe. That's very important, more important every day. Must have ambition, must be ready

to work hard, to put your profession first. Society and the journalists are ruining so many of our young ladies. They achieve a little success—and then, what happens? They go here, they go there; their names, their photographs, are in all the papers—very good publicity, of course—I don't object to it; but they don't *work*."

"That's true, Mr. Memsworth," said Susie eagerly. "But I'm ready to work till I drop, honestly I am. I'm not doing it for fun. I was—was born in the profession.

"That's what we want," he said. "As a matter of fact, I was myself. Now, second—I found a juvenile lead." He bowed to Jerningham, who blushed for once in his cool unblushing life. "I know all about him now, so I needn't say any more. But third—I found a young composer who can write songs that get across and stay there." He turned to Inigo. "Do you think you can write some more like those numbers I heard?"

"I should think so," replied Inigo carelessly. He was beginning to feel wonderlandish again, what with Mr. Memsworth and the champagne. "Any amount."

The great man looked at him in grave astonishment, in which there was perhaps a touch of awe. Here was a very extraordinary young man, who was not at all impressed by the fact that he was about to be taken up by a Memsworth. "My word, my boy!" he ejaculated.

"He can too, Mr. Memsworth," cried Susie. "Inigo's marvellous. He can just knock them off like anything."

"Thart is so," said Jerry, with lofty kindness. "You can barnk on Jollifant, Mr. Memsworth. You've nobody writing nambers for you to tech him."

"And they eat them, even in the stupidest places," Susie continued. "You could see that the other night, couldn't you? But p'raps you couldn't. I was forgetting that wretched rotten business, busting up the show."

"Ah yes. Curious, that, very curious. I've not seen anything like it for years." Mr. Memsworth looked thoughtful. "No, nothing as bad for twenty years. I don't know what you people made of it, but to me it was obvious, quite ob-

vious. Hooliganism, of course—but organised hooliganism. Somebody must have paid them to do that. The house in general was very enthusiastic. I saw that. Then why should these fellows kick up such a row, and go on doing it? Paid to do it. There for the purpose. I don't know who employed them, I don't know why they were employed, all I say is they *were* employed, paid to do it. I've seen it happen before, though not lately. I've had a lot of experience. You take my word for it. Organised rowdyism."

"I'm beginning to think that, too," said Susie, "and I know that Mrs. Joe does. I shall tell Miss Trant, don't you think so, Inigo, Jerry?"

"Meanwhile—to business," said Mr. Memsworth, looking as if he were about to give his loyal subjects a Constitution. "I take it, then, Mr. Jollifant, you're free to work for me?"

Inigo thought so, but put in a word about Felder and Hunterman.

"That can be arranged," and Mr. Memsworth waved a hand. "Leave that to me. What I want you to do is to see Julian Jaffery, who's supposed to be doing the music for my new show or at least putting some new stuff into it. We should want those numbers I heard the other night and one or two others, and then you can set to work on another thing I'm planning. I've got most of the book. And I want you, Miss Dean, to rehearse a big part—in which you'll be playing opposite Mr. Jerningham here, and you can work together—in this show that's nearly ready. You can take Mr. Jollifant's numbers that you're doing now straight into it, though I may get one of my librettists to alter the words a bit." He had in hand, it seemed, a splendid new musical comedy, that bore the provisional title, *The Mascot Girl*. It had begun as a French farce, but had been taken to Vienna, where it was transformed into an operetta, which was entirely rewritten in New York as a song-and-dance show; and now, the last vestiges of the original plot having been removed, new words and music were being introduced so that it could blossom out again as an English musical comedy. Mr. Memsworth told them all about it or at least contrived to suggest that he was telling them all about it, for there was not really much to tell. It was obvious that the thing would only begin to have a shape at the rehearsal. Nevertheless, it appeared that Susie and Jerry would have very important parts in it, and that Inigo's tunes would soon be delighting or worrying the whole country. In short, their fortunes were made, their ships almost in harbour.

"No," cried Susie, her eyes dancing, "I really couldn't eat or drink anything else. If I did I should be sick, I'm so excited."

"Sweet!" murmured Mrs. Jerningham, and patted her hand.

"But it's—it's—oh, golly!—it's marvellous. Isn't it, Inigo? Don't sit there, pretending you don't care tuppence. Isn't it marvellous? Aren't you dizzy?"

"Absolutely," said Inigo, who was in fact a trifle dizzy.

"I don't mind saying it's jerst whort I've warnted," Jerningham admitted. And he gave his wife such a sudden, unexpected and unasked for, altogether beautiful smile that no doubt she felt dizzy too. For smiles like that, she would have bought him whole theatres.

Mr. Memsworth, whom the champagne had made more benevolent and regal than ever, so that he sat there like another Haroun al Raschid, smiled upon them all, and then explained to Susie and Inigo that they had better clear things up in Gatford and then report to him in town if possible in two days' time, and on Monday at the latest. Then he would have contracts ready and everything.

Susie stared at him in a happy dream. "Oh, Mr. Memsworth, don't disappear or anything, will you? I feel as if I'm sitting in my digs making this up, just to pass the afternoon. In a minute I shall wake up."

"It's so very nice for you, isn't it?" Mrs. Jerningham cooed.

"Nice! It's—oh, I can't begin. And you've done it, Lady—I mean, Mrs. Jerningham, and I'm so glad you've

married Jerry and I hope you'll both be happy for ever and ever." And she flung out her hands, and Jerry shook one, with a solemn "Tharnks, Susie," while his bride squeezed the other, saying: "You know, we've to go up to town to-night. All such a rush, isn't it? But I do adore a rush, don't you, my dear?"

"And this," said Inigo, who had just accepted and lit a large cigar so that he felt almost vulgarly opulent already, "is the end—the very end—of *The Good Companions.*"

Susie's face fell. "Yes, it is, isn't it? I'd forgotten that. Yes, it's all right laughing, but it's rather sad, really. Why can't we have one nice thing without having to give up another nice thing?"

"That, my dear lady, is Life." Mr. Memsworth did this magnificently.

"I suppose it is, but it's beastly all the same," said Susie. "Oh, and what about the others, Jimmy and the Joes? What are they going to do now, poor darlings? Can't you do anything for them, Mr. Memsworth? They're awfully good, really. You didn't get a chance to see them properly the other night."

He shook his head. "I don't doubt it. I wish I could do something for them. I'd like to oblige you, Miss Dean, and I like to see people in our profession sticking to their friends. But these others—sorry—not in my line. Too old, you know. Much too old even for the chorus. I might possibly find a very small part in something or other for the little comedian, but really I think he'd be far better off in his own concert-party work. And the others certainly would. Sorry, but still, they'll find work all right. Can't they carry on this present show?"

"Nathing left in it," said Jerry. "All the real tarlent gone."

"No, that's not fair, Jerry," Susie told him. "But there wouldn't be enough of them to do anything with it. I mean, it couldn't be the same show, now that half of it has gone. Oh, it's a shame. They'll have to find work with another

C. P. and it won't be easy getting into a good one 'cos the season's nearly beginning."

Mr. Memsworth looked thoughtful. "The season—the season," he mused. "Now that reminds me of something that was said to me the other day. What was it? Ah, I have it. Bellerby, that's the man. Bellerby used to do a good deal of work for me at one time, and I ran across him the other day in town and he told me he was getting a resident concert party together for some resort or other, Eastbourne, Hastings, one of those places, you know. In fact, he asked me if I could recommend him a few decent people."

"Oh, but that would be marvellous! Just what they want! Do you think this man would take them?" Susie asked.

"A word from me," said Mr. Memsworth, and a wave of his hand told them the rest.

"But how are you—I mean—will you write to him or something?"

"Mr. Jollifant, just touch that bell, will you?" the great man commanded. This—his manner informed them—was his way of doing things, and they must now keep their eyes and ears open. The bell brought a waiter, and the waiter was told to bring Mr. Nurris, who it appeared was Mr. Memsworth's secretary. Mr. Nurris was a pallid young man with darkish horn-rimmed spectacles. "Look here, Nurris," cried his employer. "Can you remember Bellerby's address? You remember him? South coast somewhere. You can, eh? Then take a wire. Wait a minute, though. I must be out of this town by five. It's no use him wiring back to me. Who'll act for these four people?" he asked Susie and Inigo.

They gave him Jimmy's name and address. Thereupon, Mr. Memsworth dictated a telegram of theatrical dimensions, recommending one comedian, one conjurer-banjoist, one baritone and feed, and contralto, all experienced C. P. artistes, and asking for terms, dates, and other details, to be wired to Jimmy Nunn. "And if that doesn't bring a

reply by to-night, you may take it from me that Bellerby is either drunk or missing or both. Get it off at once, Nurris."

"And now," said Susie to Inigo, after they had shaken hands all round and declared how splendid it all was and taken their leave, "it looks as if we're all going to be fixed up. Aren't you excited? Honestly, I'm nearly ill. I want to rush up to everybody and tell them all about it. Just think of us sitting there this morning—me, anyhow—giving it all up as a bad job. And then this comes along. Wouldn't it be ghastly if I got run over or something now?" She squeezed his arm hard, then let it go and laughed.

"You've forgotten two people," he told her, after she had finished happily babbling. "One is Miss Trant."

"I'm going to see her now, to tell her all the news. And I'm sure she won't mind a bit. I believe she'll be glad. And I shall tell her to keep all my benefit money, to help to pay the damages they say they're going to claim at the measly Hippodrome. It'll all help, won't it?"

"A spot," he replied. "Those damages are going to be a nasty piece of work. I don't like the idea of poor Miss Trant being left here, with a bad arm and a bill a mile long, while we trot off to town to make our fortunes."

"If you put it like that—and I must say, Inigo, you've a nasty way of putting things—it sounds nearly as bad as murder. But it'll be all right. Everything's going to be all right for everybody, I feel sure it is. I've felt so all along. The trouble about you, my laddie, is you've no confidence——"

"Well, by gosh! I like that," he protested, "when it's only a few hours since you were moping away——"

"Don't talk such rot, Inigo. That's the worst of you. You talk such a lot of rot. It must be because you're—what is it?—an author—no, something worse than that—a man of let-ters. No, don't start being cross now, or you'll spoil everything. Who's the other one I've forgotten?"

"Our Mr. Oakroyd."

"Jess, lad. So I had," she cried. "What a shame! I haven't seen him for days. Have you? Oh, something nice *must* happen to him, it really must. We can't all just leave him, alone with his bag of tools and his little basket thing. Do you remember his little basket trunk? Wasn't it sweet? He's been a bit broody lately too, so p'raps he wants a change like the rest of us. Well, I'm sure it'll be easy to find him a job. We could take him with us, or the others might be able to find him something if they get that resident job, or Miss Trant might want him to stay with her."

"Why, what could she give him to do? What's she going to do herself anyhow?"

"Oh, I don't know. Don't be so silly and impatient, young man. Well, this is where we part. I'm going to see Miss Trant. I don't know what she'll think about me. Do I look all right, because honestly I feel tight, though I only had one glass of that champagne? And you run along and write another song or two, just to keep your hand in. No, run away. Isn't it marvellous? See you soon."

"When?"

"To-night—perhaps."

He watched her dart across the road and then trip away down the other side, so eager, so happy, like a girl in a shining fairy tale. It almost hurt him to see her like that. Something old, unreasonable, stirred apprehensively inside him—a little Inigo that had once looked up from his bone and his bride to see the trampling mastodon blotting out the sky. Then he grinned at himself and walked away.

IV

Once more we discover Mrs. Joe in her sitting-room, surrounded by the brown cotton-woolly moors and glens that haunted the imagination of Mrs. Pennyfeather's uncle. Mrs. Joe is still knitting that mysterious pink garment, which is now more complicated and untidier than ever. She had knitted steadily through these dark idle days, and it looks as if there is a danger of her knitting herself inside

this pink monster and having to be rescued with a pair of shears. We have never pretended that she was young, but now, as she sits there, working away, she looks older than she did. In that mask of mingled dignity and simple foolishness, there has been a recent invasion of fine lines; her face begins to droop and sag. This past week she has suffered as an artiste, a wife, and a mother—for though George is safe on Denmark Hill, he has to be paid for, and his passion for playing football in side-streets with a little india-rubber ball is creating a terrible boot problem. No doubt she is thinking about these things, the bewildering mechanics of life, as she stares into the microscopic fire, itself evidence enough of the Brundit new economic policy. For a few minutes, during which we shall do well to look upon her with kindness, for very soon, this very night in fact, she is going her way and we are going ours and the acquaintance is at an end, she sits and stares and weaves the monstrous mesh. Then she starts up. Somebody has burst into the room. It is Susie.

Susie takes a deep breath, plucks off her hat and flings it anywhere, takes another deep breath, and falls into a chair.

"You did give me a Start, my dear," Mrs. Joe tells her, reproachfully. "I wondered what on earth it could be."

And now Susie begins: "Talk about news! My dear, I'm simply bursting with 'em. Jerry's married Lady Partlit, the woman I told you about, who sent the bouquet, and I've seen them both, had lunch with them, and Mr. Memsworth, the Emperor, you know, the musical-comedy man, he was there too, and we're all going to London and Jerry and I are going to have parts, really fat parts, in a new show he's doing, and Inigo's going to write the music, and Mr. Memsworth's wired to a man who's getting up a resident C. P. somewhere——"

"Stop it, child, stop it," Mrs. Joe shrieks. "You're putting me in a Maze, with your Lady Partridges and Emperors. I don't know whether I'm sitting in this room or where I am. Now just calm yourself down and get your

breath and begin at the beginning and let me take it all in."

"Well, you see——"

"But, Susie my dear, you're not teasing me, are you? I mean, you're not just making it all up. I couldn't bear that just now. Some other time, perhaps, it would be just a little fun and frolic between ourselves—nobody can say I don't like a little joking in a friendly way—but just now, what with all things being at Sixes and Sevens, no, worse than that, if you count in the injuries and loss of salaries, to say nothing of future engagements, that is, whether there'll be any at all and if so, where—I really couldn't bear it. So don't tell me anything you're making up, will you?"

"Making it up! I couldn't make it up. Nobody could. Just you listen and don't say a word." After which, Mrs. Joe does listen, entranced, to a very full account of the lunch.

"Did you ever!" cried Mrs. Joe. "I never did. There's your Chance, come at last, you might say, when hope had fled. Doesn't it show you? My words, it does." She is almost aghast at this revelation of her prophetic powers. "There was I, on Saturday, saying to you when you told me that Mortimer man was there, 'What did I tell you? Here's your Chance, come to you, without asking, in Gatford.' And then when nothing came of it—and the things I've said to Joe about what he did that night really won't bear thinking of, not in cold blood—when nothing came of it, I could have slapped myself for Leading You On. 'You've only gone and made it worse, you silly creature,' I said to myself. And yet something told me. Try as I might, it still told me. And now here you are, with a Bigger Chance. And it had to come, even if it took a marriage no more expected than the Man in the Moon to do it, you might say. It—it—a thing like this—makes you ask yourself, Where Are We?—What Are We?—if you see what I mean." She loses herself in these profundities for a moment or two. Then she throws aside all her knitting and

needles and balls of wool. "I'm glad. I'm very very glad, my dear. I know it means breaking up and starting afresh somewhere else for us, with the season so near too, but I'm still glad, just for your own sake, my dear." And she leans forward and kisses her young friend's flushed face.

"But, you stupid, I've news for you too," Susie points out.

"Anything I'm sure will be welcome," Mrs. Joe replies. Then she adds, a trifle wistfully: "There hasn't been anything said about us, has there?"

"Of course there has. That's what I'm trying to tell you." And out it comes, to delight Mrs. Joe.

"Though," she is careful to say, "as things go in the ordinary way—and unless Luckiness has set in all round—it's only a Shot in the Dark so far. A manager says he wants artistes for a resident season at one of our best resorts. He says it once. Well and good! He may say it twice. Twice is quite possible. But after that, he's not going to say it any more—and why? Because he's got the artistes. They flocked in, my dear, flocked. They don't need to be told twice. You do see what I mean, don't you? He told Mr. Memsworth about this some days ago—perhaps a week ago, perhaps longer—and if he's told other people, he's already had the choice of a hundred. To ask for artistes for a good resident season," she adds solemnly, "is like—well, you might as well ask for haystacks for a needle."

"Oh, he may not have booked anybody," Susie remarks, rather carelessly. "Anyhow, we'll soon see. He was told to wire a reply to Jimmy."

"Joe's over there now. Went to discuss the situation, and so I told him 'Very well, but if it's to be a discussion, stay in the rooms and have something in. Send Out for a bottle or two of beer and leave it at that, and don't go discussing on licenced premises, because that's how the money goes. That's a thing to watch when you're married, my dear. Always get him to Send Out for something and do his discussing at home."

Susie laughs. "I'll remember that, though it doesn't matter because I don't intend ever to get married."

"Don't tell me, because I know how you feel. I was just the same at your age. But then—all of a sudden, before you can say Jack Robinson—it comes over you."

"I think I know somebody it's coming over now," Susie tells her confidentially. "And that's Miss Trant."

"No!"

"Yes. I've just seen her. And I found him there, the great *him*. Didn't I ever tell you about that Scotch doctor she's been quietly in love with for ages?" To make sure of the matter, she tells her now. "And there he was the day," she concludes, employing what passes in theatrical circles for a good Scots accent, "looking into herrr eyes and callin' herrr Eleezabeth. He's verra tall an' verra bony an' verra seerious, but wi' a nice kind face. An' if he's not proposin' marritch the morn's morn an' if she's no gladly acceptin' him, ah'll go an' eat ma best bonnet. Hoots, woman, it's a—oh, I can't do any more, but anyhow there they are, falling in love all over again like billy-oh, and blushing away every time they look at one another. And Miss Trant pretends to be very worried about what we're all going to do, and about the show busting up, and about all this money she may have to pay out, but she doesn't care a damn, really. I could see it in her eye. What she's thinking about now is her Doctorr McFarlane, ye ken. And good luck to her, the darling, I say."

"So do I, indeed I do." Mrs. Joe reflects for a moment. "It's a noble profession, though I must say I could never fancy one of them. Don't you feel that too, my dear? I mean, as soon as you said anything to keep them in their place a bit, they'd say, 'Let me look at your tongue,' and then where would you be? Besides, think of being married to a man who knew everything that was going on inside you, all about your liver and everything! You'd never be able to look him in the face. I remember a doctor—well, he wasn't quite a doctor but he was going to be one—a medical student, you know—and he was very

attached to me, I couldn't keep him away—this was before I met Joe, long before, when I first went on the stage—and he was very good-looking and most amusing company, but one Sunday night, when he'd had a little too much—we'd been out to Richmond, I remember, and it was a very hot day—and he told me what he'd been doing to a rabbit—it was a dead rabbit, but still—well, I never fancied him after that. I didn't like the look in his eye. But Miss Trant, I dare say, is different. You feel—don't you, my dear?—she wouldn't care about a thing like that. It's all Temperament."

But now there are noises off. Enter three gentlemen, carrying bottled ale.

"Has Susie told you?" Joe roars at his wife. "Well, Jimmy's just had a wire. We've just left him." He rubs his hands and shows her a long slow delighted grin.

"What does he say then?" Mrs. Joe demands, impatiently. "Don't stand there, without a word. Of all the aggravating men, Joe——!"

"Wants to see us on Monday," Mr. Morton Mitcham tells her. "Terms are good. Open middle of April, clean run through until end of September. Rehearse beginning of April, on full pay. And if it's the same Bellerby I played with in Nought Six, he's a gentleman."

"Bit of your doing, this, Susie," Joe roars again. "I've heard all about you. After this, up among the stars so high, eh? Shan't be allowed to talk to you after this week."

"Don't be an idiot, Joe. But honestly, isn't it marvellous?"

"Splendiferous! And what do you say to me for giving that other fellow a tap on the jaw? Don't forget us, will you?"

"As if I should!"

He gives her a gigantic hug. Mrs. Joe and Mr. Mitcham explain to one another, with the ease and rapidity of veterans, the advantages of a resident season on the South

coast. Inigo discovers some tumblers on the sideboard and opens the beer. The gentlemen immediately fall to drinking healths and Mrs. Joe admits that at this moment she could do with "something sharp." Susie, perched on the edge of the table, exchanges smiles with Inigo, because the others seem so happy. Somebody wants to know where Mr. Oakroyd is, and nobody is able to supply the information. Everybody, however, has so much to say and is so eager to say it that Mr. Oakroyd, who after all has not disappeared into the blue, is soon forgotten. Susie has accepted a cigarette, Joe and Inigo have their pipes, Mr. Mitcham has brought out one of his famous cheroots, so that now the room is full of smoke. Thus we see them through a blue haze: Mr. Morton Mitcham, towering, fantastic, less like a broken-down senator than he was when we first met him at Dullingham Junction, but still the same conglomeration of creaking bone, bending brow, and retreating hair, the same traveller from unimaginable places; Mrs. Joe, flushed, almost sparkling now, ten years younger than she was an hour ago, talking away and sipping her bottled beer but still ready at any moment to play the Duchess of Dorking; the great shoulders and honest beaming face of Joe himself, as he nods and grins and agrees with everybody; Inigo of the wandering nose and wandering lock of hair, at once clean and untidy in the pleasant undergraduate fashion that remains with some men; and Susie, swinging her legs at the table's edge, turning eagerly from one to another of her companions, talking, laughing, teasing, fooling, as if those dark eyes of hers would see ten thousand years of life undimmed. In another moment they will be nothing but names and news. We see them through this haze, which thickens, deepens, shredding away colour, blurring shape, like Time itself flowing mistily away; and then the curtain comes rustling down, and now we cannot see them at all and perhaps will never see them again.

V

And what was Mr. Oakroyd doing all this time? What has kept him in the background? The answer is—a new part. For the first and last time in his life, Mr. Oakroyd played the detective, a rôle for which—not being a reader of sensational fiction—he had no particular liking or aptitude. But the great catastrophe had left him darkly brooding, and after innumerable pipes of *Old Salt* and some talk with his friend, Mr. Jock Campbell, a man compact of suspicion, he had begun to put two and two together. Thus it came about that he played the detective, and we shall soon discover to what purpose if we wait for him in Miss Trant's room at the nursing home, on the morning of the day when Susie and Inigo were due to depart to London, and even Mrs. Joe and the others were thinking seriously about packing.

Miss Trant was still in the nursing home, but if she had been in a hurry to leave it, she could have done so. She preferred, however, to stay on until her arm was completely better, to the great content of her new medical adviser, Dr. Hugh McFarlane, who contrived to visit her every day. He had now gone into the matter of the Hippodrome claims with Mr. Gooch, and this meant, of course, that he had to see her as often as possible, whatever might happen to a good general practice and the parathyroid glands. Having completely recovered from the shock, Miss Trant was now able to get up, but for the time being she was keeping to her room. When Hugh called, on this particular morning, he found her sitting in an armchair.

"I telephoned to Gooch," he explained, "and he's coming along to see you. Something very special, he says. I don't know that I can stay for long, but he'll tell you all about it, Elizabeth."

"It's a shame, your doing so much," she told him. "I'm sure you can't spare the time. You mustn't bother any more about it, Hugh."

And he replied that it was no trouble at all, and she said she was sure it must be, and he replied again, quite gruffly, that it was a pleasure, and by this time their eyes had joined in the dialogue and were making the most reckless remarks to one another, so that though their tongues had framed only the most innocent friendly syllables, she was bright pink and he was brick red. Shy people can engage in this commerce for quite a long time before anything decisive happens, and it is not a stage of the passion that has any interest at all for outsiders (though Miss Trant's nurse, who had followed every move, noted every blush, and taken the temperature of the affair each day, must be excepted), so that we can safely withdraw to await the arrival of Mr. Gooch.

Mr. Gooch was a solicitor with a very large practice and also a marked Midlands accent. These two things taken together indicate that he was an unusually astute man who knew a great deal about everybody in Gatford, Mundley and Stort. Miss Trant's family solicitor, Mr. Truby of Cheltenham, would not have approved of Mr. Gooch at all, but then Mr. Truby would have been afraid to contest claims that Mr. Gooch regarded as mere whims, impudent triflings. Hugh's Scotch instinct for a good fighting lawyer had not been at fault when it had taken him to Mr. Gooch. For the rest, it only remains to be said that Mr. Gooch was not at all sharp, wizened, ferret-faced, but a stout rubicund man with an enormous flat face that suggested nothing but a sleepy good-humour.

Having bluntly told Miss Trant that he was pleased to meet her and glad to see she was sitting up, Mr. Gooch came at once to business. "Now, Miss Trant," he began, "I've looked into this matter. I thought at first it was a hopeless job. You can't deny your liability, you see. I've had a look at your agreement with the Hippodrome, and your liability's there all right. Of course you never thought of anything of this sort happening, did you?"

"Naturally not," Miss Trant replied. "Who would? I

mean, it's not the kind of thing that does happen, you see."

"Quite so," said Mr. Gooch, creasing his vast face. "Only you've got to be prepared for anything in this world. That's what agreements and contracts are for. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred they're only time and money thrown away, but there's always the hundredth. This is it. It's a pity you put your name to that agreement, Miss Trant, if you don't mind me saying so. These theatrical lettings are out of my line—and I don't pretend to know a lot about 'em—but that one you signed doesn't look right to me, smells fishy, that one. And that's going to be worth looking into, I fancy—afterwards, just to make a bit of mischief. But it's watertight, no mistake about that. You're liable, and when they claim, you'll have to pay up." Having said this, he looked at her in a manner that suggested he was quite pleased about it.

Miss Trant was not pleased and came to the conclusion that Mr. Gooch was a fool. "It's a shame," she cried. "I wouldn't care if it was my fault in any way. But it wasn't, as you know, and I've had to suffer anyhow. I and my party have lost money, you see, quite apart from anything I may have to pay. And then we've suffered in other ways too. And all because a few hooligans were determined to spoil our performance."

Here Dr. McFarlane muttered something that hinted what he would do to such fellows if he caught them. It may have concerned their parathyroid glands.

"Quite so," said Mr. Gooch again, still smiling good-humouredly. "But though we might whittle the claim down a bit when it comes—it hasn't come yet, you know, but it's on its way, you might say—we can't contest it. I want to make you understand that, Miss Trant. That's clear, isn't it? All right, then that's settled."

He still seemed very pleased with himself, and Miss Trant began to think that even poor Mr. Truby, though he may have been thinking for months she was wrong in

her head, could have done better than this. And what made it much worse was that he was Hugh's choice. Poor Hugh! —he had looked so knowing about his Mr. Gooch.

"But there's another point," Mr. Gooch continued, with relish, "and this is where we really come in. You're responsible to them, all right. But who's responsible to you? Who, in fact, is the guilty party?" He paused and looked at her expectantly.

She gave a mental if not an actual shrug. "That's soon settled too," she replied, not without irony, "but it doesn't help much. A gang of roughs—from nowhere. If it hadn't been for them, nothing would have happened. But what good will that do us—I mean, knowing that? Oh—it's all stupid! I'm sorry, but it really is."

"It might turn out stupid for somebody," said Mr. Gooch, who was quite unperturbed, "but it's not half so stupid as it looks. Quite tricky up to a point, in fact—quite tricky. I didn't want to bother you just now with all this, but I thought you'd better know the line I'm taking. If you don't mind waiting a minute, I'll just see if he's here. I left a message for him to come along." With that, he lumbered out, leaving Miss Trant staring at her companion.

"I don't understand what he's talking about," she confessed, frowning. "Is he—really—a reliable man?"

Hugh laughed. "I've been watching you, Elizabeth. I saw you thought he wasn't going to be any use to you."

"No, that's not fair, I didn't. Only——"

"Just wait. He's here."

He was and there was somebody with him. It was Mr. Oakroyd, tightly clutching his cap and looking very embarrassed. He gave her a very uneasy grin.

"Well, Mr. Oakroyd," and she smiled, "this is very nice. I didn't expect to see you."

Mr. Oakroyd cleared his throat. "Ar yer getting on, Miss Trant?"

"Very well, thank you. What have you been doing lately?"

"Well—er—I've been busy—like." And he nodded towards Mr. Gooch.

"Oh!" cried Miss Trant. "I didn't understand. You've come here with Mr. Gooch, have you?"

"That's right," replied Mr. Oakroyd, more at ease now. "Any rate, he left word for me to come here. Said I'd better tell yer mysen."

"And you got hold of the other chap," Mr. Gooch inquired, putting his head on one side in a droll fashion, "made sure of him, did you?"

"He's here," said Mr. Oakroyd, jerking a thumb over his shoulder.

"He's here, is he?" Mr. Gooch was quite lively. "Where? Outside?"

"On t'mat," replied Mr. Oakroyd, grinning. "D'you want him in?"

"If Miss Trant doesn't mind," said Mr. Gooch, glancing at her.

"Of course I don't mind," said Miss Trant, staring at them. "But what is it all about?" And she suddenly began to laugh.

"It's like this here, Miss Trant," Mr. Oakroyd began, earnestly. "After that there do o' Saturday, I begins to put two an' two together. There'd been summat up all t'week, though it were nowt to Saturday. Saturday capped t'lot, as yer knaw very well. Nar there's one or two had said to me they thowt it were a put-up job, them chaps makking all that to-do. I didn't like look on it at all, I didn't. So I puts my thinking cap on."

"That's the way," said Mr. Gooch approvingly. "Thinking cap."

"Nar a friend o' mine that doesn't belong here but 'ud been here a bit, this chap 'ud dropped a remark to me when I saw him last week—it were in t'*Market Tavern* o'

Thursday—an' when I towd him I was here wi' *T'Good Companions*, then he says 'You had any bother lately, 'cos you're going to have some right sharp?' Summat like that, he says. Well, I didn't tak' much notice on it at time, an' he were off afore I could say owt. So I lets it drop, you might say. But t'other day, o' Monday it wor, when I begins to puzzle it out a bit, I thowt 'Ar did he knaw we'd have some bother?' He'd said we would have and—by gow!—we'd had some bother an' all. So I puts two an' two together. I thowt to mysen 'He's in t'know, he is. If this here's a put-up job, he's been where they've been putting it up, as you might say.' That's what I thowt."

Mr. Gooch wagged his huge head at Miss Trant. "That's the way," he said once more. "Thinking cap again."

Miss Trant was interested now. "Go on, Mr. Oakroyd. This is exciting."

"So I sets off to look for him, this here friend o' mine. Any rate, I maks a few inquiries. Meantime, I goes to see Jimmy Nunn, an' he tells me what Soosie towd him about Doctor McFarlane here going to Mr. Goodge about this here job, so I goes to Mr. Goodge an' all an' tells him what I think about it an' he says there might be summat in it an' I'd better keep on looking for this friend o' mine, d'you see. 'I'll do what I can,' he says, 'to help you to find him. What's he like?' he says. An' I tells him, an' off I goes again an' comes on one chap 'at 'ud seen him an' he puts me on to another chap. Eh, it were a business! But at finish up, I finds him."

"Was he here in Gatford?" Miss Trant asked.

"Here! He wor fowty mile away an' just settin' off to go another fowty or fifty. He's allus on t'move," he added, not without pride. "I were wi' him one time—on t'road. If I hadn't been, he wouldn't ha' come back. He worn't set on it—'cos he didn't want to be mixed up in t'job—but he come o' t'finish, being a pal o' mine."

"Well, we'd better have him in now," said Mr. Gooch, "unless Miss Trant doesn't want to be bothered. You can

leave it all to me, you know, Miss Trant, but I thought you might like to hear what he has to say."

"I should think so!" cried Miss Trant. "Hurry up and bring him before he runs away."

"Nay, he'll noan do that," said Mr. Oakroyd, almost reproachfully. "I'll fetch him." And off he went.

"And you really think there's something in this?" said Dr. McFarlane, looking anxiously at Mr. Gooch.

"I'm pretty sure there is," that gentleman replied, smiling and half-closing his eyes. "Pre-tty sure there is." Then he opened his eyes, wide. "But I can't tell you exactly what—not yet."

"Well, whether there is or not," cried Miss Trant excitedly, "it's lovely. And I hope there is, just for Mr. Oakroyd's sake. I've told you about him, haven't I, Hugh?"

"This is him," said Mr. Oakroyd, returning at that moment, "Joby Jackson. Nar, Joby lad, yer can tell 'em yersen."

Our old friend, Mr. Jackson looked from one to another of his audience and rubbed his chin dubiously. We see him for a moment robbed of that bright confidence which was part of his charm.

"Now then?" said Mr. Gooch.

"It's like this," said Joby hoarsely. "Yer not making a police-court job o' this, are yer? If y'are, I want to keep out, see? Anything to oblige a pal—an' anyhow they did the dirty on yer—but I don't want to be put in a little box with a clever bloke on the other side saying 'And where were you on the fourteenth of July last?' No witnessing for me. Oh no! I'll tell yer what I know for George 'ere, but yer don't put me in the box, see?"

"There isn't going to be a box; don't worry," said Mr. Gooch. "It isn't that sort of business at all."

"Good enough then," said Joby, hesitating no longer and speaking with more freedom. "What yer want to know is 'ow did I come to know there might be a bit o' bother,

that's it, isn't it? Right." He paused, gave a sharp glance round, thoroughly enjoying the situation. "Well, I'm 'ere in Gatford, see. One morning in a boozer—not the *Market Tavern,* lower class of 'ouse altogether—tell yer its moniker in a minute—the *Black Bull,* that's it. Know it?"

Mr. Gooch pondered for a moment. "Corner of Castle Street," he said finally. "Little place. Nearly got its licence taken away last year."

"That's the place," said Joby. "Well, I'm in there, see—one morning, havin' one with some o' the lads. When I say some o' the lads, I don't mean they was pals o' mine. But I knew some of 'em. Matter o' fact, some of 'em was on the road, same as meself. They wasn't workin' just then, 'cos Gorley's place is near 'ere, see—an' Gorley's the feller that owns some o' them Cock'rels and Swishbacks—and they was 'ere, waitin' for the engines to be over'aulded, see. The other fellers I didn't know—local fellers, they was, all in a click, y'know, a gang, with about the price of a pint between the lot of 'em. Well there we are—when in comes a feller, a biggish bloke, all dressed up, smart feller. One or two o' the lads knows 'im, see, same as if they'd done a bit o' work for 'im one time, when they *did* work. This feller then looks us over, nods 'ere an' there, very friendly like, calls the landlord an' orders drinks all round. Sensation in court! Then when the landlord's gone and we're all well into the pig's ear, he sort o' gathers us round like an' says quietly 'Any o' you fellers like to earn some easy money?' 'What's the idear?' we want to know. 'Only a bit of a joke on my part,' 'e says, 'just payin' somebody off,' 'e says, 'an' money for nothing for some o' you lads.' He didn't look a money for nothing bloke to me, I don't mind tellin' yer, an' when 'e says, 'Before we go any further, who's game?' I didn't catch on, see. I thought 'I don't like the look of you, chum. Bit too careful about your joke. Too much lookin' over the shoulder.' So me an' two or three more wasn't in it, see, an' we sits in the other corner, tryin' to look as if we wasn't still drinkin' the beer

he paid for. 'E whispers for about ten minutes, then slings it. But I got a word or two, something about a show at the Hip. When 'e goes, the other fellers lets on then, see. 'Why don't yer come in?' they says to us. 'Quid each for sittin' at the back o' the Hip. an' giving 'em the bird, an' p'raps another quid for Saturday if it pans out all right,' they says——"

"And those were the men then," Miss Trant gasped. "But why? I don't understand. Who was this man?"

"Now we come to it," said Mr. Gooch. "Who was he?"

"I 'eard 'is name," Joby replied slowly, "'cos, as I say, some of 'em knew 'im——"

"Good! And what was it?"

"That's it. I've forgotten it. Clean gone. An' me with a memory, my God! that's won me more pints o' beer in bets than you could swallow from now to——"

"Come along," said Mr. Gooch. "This won't do, you know. You might as well give us the name now. It's just that we want."

"It's no good yer coming along me," cried Joby aggressively. "Yer can come along till yer blue an' it won't make no diff'rence. I've tried to remember that feller's moniker all day. 'Ere, George, you can tell 'em. Wasn't I tryin' to remember it all along the road 'ere?"

"Ay, yer wor, Joby," Mr. Oakroyd replied mournfully. It began to look as if he had had all his trouble for nothing.

"Well, can't you remember anything about him?" said Mr. Gooch, who looked neither sleepy nor good-humoured now.

"Let's see. 'Alf a minute. Biggish bloke. Clean-shaved. Reddish face. Baggy under the eyes, poached-egg style. Too much whisky." But that did not seem to help much, for Gatford and district could boast of dozens of middle-aged gentlemen exactly like that. Then Joby remembered

something else. "'Ere, 'alf a minute. Pitchers! Something to do with pitchers."

"Pitchers?" Mr. Gooch stared at him.

"That's ri'. Yer know, films, cinemas!"

"Ah!" Mr. Gooch sounded triumphant. "Was his name Ridvers?"

"You've got it, chum," shouted Joby, in great excitement. "You've got it in one. Ridvers, that's it. Now 'ow the—I mean—'ow did I come to forget that? Ridvers. That's it all right an' no mistake. Do yer know 'im, Mister?"

"I know Mr. Ridvers," Mr. Gooch replied, a trifle grimly, "and Mr. Ridvers knows me. I don't think I shall have a lot of trouble with Mr. Ridvers. I happen to know he's trying to sell his three cinema halls to a big syndicate. In fact, I know a lot about Mr. Ridvers. And now I know a bit more, don't I? Well, well! Hello!" He stared at Miss Trant, who was wrinkling her brow. "Do you know him too?"

"I'm just trying to think. There was a man, a horrid man, pushed his way into my room at the hotel one afternoon, two or three weeks ago, and he said he had something to do with cinemas here. He was awfully rude and disagreeable—a beast of a man—and so I wouldn't listen to him, just told him to go. And I heard afterwards that some of the men in the party had some trouble with him after that, downstairs. I'm sure that must be the same man."

"So am I," said Mr. Gooch.

"I've a mind to call on this Ridvers," Dr. McFarlane began, looking very fierce.

"Leave him to me, Doctor, leave him to me," said Mr. Gooch. "I'll attend to him. He's had his little joke, and this is where he pays for it." He turned to Joby. "And don't you worry about courts of law. This won't get that far, if I know Mr. Ridvers. But I tell you what you can do,

my lad, and I'll see you don't lose by it. You can just give me as many names of those other fellows as you can remember. That'll help us to show Mr. Ridvers we know all about his little games." He whipped out paper and pencil and took Joby aside.

"Well done, Mr. Oakroyd!" said Dr. McFarlane, shaking him by the hand. "That's fine."

"Isn't it?" cried Miss Trant. "Whatever happens, I'm very very grateful to you. You've been wonderful, finding all this out for us."

"Nay, I've done nowt. It's Joby who'll ha' done t'trick."

"No, it's you really, and I can't tell you how grateful I am. And listen, I've been wanting to talk to you, now that we've all broken up. Aren't you sorry?"

"Eh, I am, Miss Trant. I don't like thowt on us all leavin' one another, I don't. Ther's Soos an' Inigo off this afternoon—I'm off to t'station wi' 'em if I can get—an' though I'm right glad they're doing so well, I'll be right sorry to see 'em go, I will that. Eh, we've had wer bit o' fun together, three on us."

"But tell me," said Miss Trant, looking at him very earnestly, "what are you going to do? I've been wanting to talk to you about that."

"Nay, I've been so throng wi' this business, I don't fairly knaw. Ther's been a bit o' talk about it. Soos wants me to go to London afore so long, 'cos she fancies she can get me summat to do there. An' Joe says if I went wi' them, p'raps ther'd be a job there——"

"And I don't know exactly what I'm going to do," she said, "but that's what I was going to say to you too. But look here, will you talk to the others seriously to-day, and then come to see me—let me see—to-morrow morning sometime, and then we can talk about it properly. Will you do that?"

"Ay, I will," said Mr. Oakroyd solemnly, and then awkwardly took his leave of her. But he did not talk it over

with the others and he did not call upon her the next morning.

"Yer mun come an' have a bit o' dinner wi' me, Joby lad," he said, as they left the nursing home in triumph. "I towd t'landlady yer might—she's a right good sort is this, an' I've been there a time nar—an' she'll have it ready."

"I'm with yer, George," said Joby in great content. He had been promised a reward for his services by Mr. Gooch, and, reward or no reward, had enjoyed his morning.

They had hardly set foot in the house, however, before the landlady rushed up and thrust something in Mr. Oakroyd's face, just as if it had been there some time and she was anxious to get rid of it, fearing that it would explode at any moment. And indeed this is indeed exactly what she felt, for the thing she handed over was a telegram. At the sight of it Mr. Oakroyd's triumphant morning crashed to smithereens. "By gow!" he muttered, staring.

It was Joby's turn to read it now. *Come at once mother bad. Leonard.* He made a little clucking noise. "That's ruddy 'ard lines, George," he said, seriously, sympathetically. "The old trouble-and-strife, eh? Bad, eh? Aw, that's rotten, George. 'Ope for the best, though."

"I knew ther were summat. I did, I knew," Mr. Oakroyd was muttering. Then he looked at Joby. "I mun be off soon as I can. When's t'next train up there, lad?"

Joby knew, for he was an authority on trains. There was one in the middle of the afternoon, and this gave him time after dinner to scrawl his Bruddersford address and a few words of explanation on a bit of paper, to be conveyed to Miss Trant by "t'landlady's little lad," to put his things together and settle his bill, to hurry round and say good-bye to Susie and Inigo. There was no time to see the others, but perhaps they would not be gone when he returned, if he did return. Joby went with him to the station, though his own train did not go until five o'clock.

"All the best, George. An' don't forget—Joby Jackson, *World's Fair*—finds me ev'ry time, see. Keep smilin'."

"So long, Joby lad. See thee again some day. On t'road, eh?"

And then the train went roaring North.

CHAPTER VI

MR. OAKROYD GOES HOME

I

It was deep dusk when Mr. Oakroyd's train arrived at Black Moor Junction. He could see the street lamps twinkling on the hills, and here and there trams crawling up and down like golden beetles. The train stopped several minutes at Black Moor, as it always does, and then, having lost all its enthusiasm, it slowly chuff-chuffed into the gloom until at last it came to a standstill in Bruddersford Station. Mr. Oakroyd stepped out, carrying the small suitcase that for some time now had replaced the famous little basket trunk, and made his way to the exit with all the easy despatch of a travelled man. He could dismiss railway stations with a glance now, having been so long and so far on the road, all the autumn and winter, from Sandybay as far up as Middleford. This was really the first time he had come back to Bruddersford since be began his travels, for though he had visited Ogden Street just after Christmas, he had only gone by tram from Luddenstall, and that did not count. He had often seen himself coming back like this, arriving by train and so on, having a bit of a holiday like, smoking a leisurely pipe in Woolgate long after everybody else had clattered off to work, slipping round to the Working Men's Club at night to tell some of the chaps where he had been and what he had seen. But now it was all different. This trip had a shaky and darkish look about it. As he crossed the end of Market Street to

get into Woolgate, the great black tower of the Town Hall jerkily shook out the notes of *Tom Bowling*, a very melancholy tune on the chimes. Mr. Oakroyd had never admired it, but now he suddenly decided he hated it. How folk put up with such a din was a mystery.

"Here, lad," he cried, at the corner of Woolgate, "'ave you got t'*Evening Express?*" Buying a paper made him feel a little more cheerful.

Walking up Woolgate, he had a shock. Buttershaw's, the tripe and music shop, was closed, empty, to let. Something must have happened there. When was it he had been talking to Mrs. Buttershaw, something about Lily and how she used to go there for pantomime songs? Yes, on a tram, it was, one Saturday. And Joe Buttershaw had been there five-and-twenty year to his knowledge; everybody knew Joe's; and now it wasn't there. It made everything look uncertain, strange, as if half the street had gone.

Not a sign of anybody in at 51. It was hardly time for Leonard to be home, if he was still working at Gregson's, but it did not look as if anybody was there. He knocked, though he knew somehow before he put his hand to the door that it was useless, for the place had a real shut-up look about it.

"Eh, it's Mr. Oakroyd!" Mrs. Sugden was looking out of the house next door. "Just a minute, Mr. Oakroyd. I've got t'key."

She opened the door and marched in with him. There was a bit of fire in the grate, and the table was laid for a late tea. Mrs. Sugden, happily bustling about the room, talked with gusto. "Did your Leonard send for yer? I told him he'd 'ave to send. And I've been doing a bit o' tidying up for him, an' getting him his tea. A lad like that can't look after hissen, can he? An' I've been right sorry for him, I 'ave."

Mr. Oakroyd, very uneasy now, asked where his wife was.

"Eh, didn't your Leonard tell yer?" cried Mrs. Sugden,

staring at him. "She's in t'Infirmary. They took her away —eh, when was it—Friday or Saturday—ay, it were Friday 'cos I were just paying me insurance, I'd got t'book in me 'and, when they come for her. They 'ad t'operate right sharp—eh, she were that bad. She's left it so long. She's been badly for weeks and weeks. Got a pain 'ere." Mrs. Sugden put a hand on her ample side. "I could see she were bad. 'Eh,' I says, 'yer can't let it go like that, yer mun see t'doctor.' 'No doctors for me, Mrs. Sugden,' she says. 'I can manage.' Ay, that's just what she said, 'I can manage.' An' I could see wi' me own eyes she were bad. At t'upshot, I calls to your Leonard—that were t'beginning o' last week—an' I says to 'im, 'Eh, Leonard, you'll ha' to mak' your mother see t'doctor. It's no way o' going on, this isn't. She's poorly.' 'I think she is,' he says, 'though she's said nowt to me.' 'I knaw she is,' I says. 'I'll get one,' he says. But no doctor come that day nor t'day after. Next morning she couldn't get up out o' bed, she were that bad, an' I come in for a bit an' your Leonard fetched t'doctor to her, an' he said they'd 'ave t'operate soon as they could. It were owd Doctor Mackintosh—'im 'at sees 'em at t'club—an'—he wor in a state about 'er. Nivver seen him in sich a stew. He were fairly boiling an' sweeating."

"What's it she's got?" asked Mr. Oakroyd. His voice was so hoarse that he had to clear his throat and repeat the question.

"It's summat like appendis," replied Mrs. Sugden, "only it's farther on like. Your Leonard said summat about perry —perrytotitis, but I couldn't quite mak' it out."

"And what about this here operation, did it come off all right?"

"Oh, they operated, straight off. They 'ad to. Eh, I believe she's 'ad another sin' then, Mr. Oakroyd. I believe she 'as," Mrs. Sugden added, with mournful gusto.

He stared at her in horror. "She—she mun be bad then," he stammered finally.

"Eh, she is, poor soul! Your Leonard's nobbut seen her

once, an' I 'aven't set eyes on her sin' she were ta'en away, but Mrs. Flather—her little lass is in—towed me she were in a bad way, one o' nurses 'ad said summat to her about it. But we mun hope for t'best, that's all. An' standin' here talkin'. Sit yer down, Mr. Oakroyd, an' I'll mak' yer a bit o' tea. Your Leonard'll be here in a minute—it's his time —an' I allus mak' him a bit. I've been bakin' to-day. I'll fetch a curran' cake an' a piece o' fatty cake in, if you'll just watch t'kettle a minute."

Ten minutes later, she had come and gone again, and Mr. Oakroyd was sitting at the table with his son, Leonard, a very subdued Leonard indeed. The dandy huntsman who had marked and captured bright feminine prey in so many social-and-dance halls, cinemas and cheap cafés, had vanished, and in his place was a troubled, frightened lad with a trembling lower lip, a lad who had caught a glimpse of another and dreadful huntsman. He could add very little to the information already supplied by Mrs. Sugden.

Mr. Oakroyd found relief in a sudden spurt of anger. "Yer gurt fat-head," he cried, "why didn't you let me knaw afore 'at your mother was so poorly? Haven't sense you were born wi'!"

"I couldn't," Leonard mumbled miserably.

"Ar d'you mean you couldn't? Couse you could!"

"I couldn't. I told you, I didn't know at first, and then when Mar was taken so bad, she said 'Don't tell yer father.' It's last thing she did say to me."

Mr. Oakroyd's anger fell away from him. He stared down at the table. "What did she want to say that for?" he asked quietly, at last.

"Nay, I don't know," his son muttered. "Except she didn't want you to know."

Mr. Oakroyd pushed away his cup, and made a little sad clicking noise. "When I come at Christmas, I knew she were poorly then, an' I towd her so. An' I towd our Lily she wor in a letter I wrote. Eh, dear!" For a moment he surveyed in silence the whole melancholy confusion of this

life. "Well, I'll go to t'Infirmary i' t'morning. Happen they'll let me see her. What did they say when you asked to-day?"

"Said she was just about the same. She's bad, father; she is bad." He got up from the table and turned away.

Mr. Oakroyd automatically filled his pipe with *Old Salt,* but did not light it. He remained where he was at the table, flattening his cheek against his fist, and sank into a troubled reverie. Leonard went upstairs, came down again, smoked a cigarette over the fire.

"Me Aunt Alice came last night," Leonard remarked, breaking the long silence.

"Ay, she did, did she?" Mr. Oakroyd left the table now and lit his pipe. "An' ar's she gettin' on then?" His wife's sister, this Alice, was married to a railwayman, and lived at the other side of Bruddersford. Mr. Oakroyd had not seen her for years. As a matter of fact, he disliked both her and her husband.

"All right," said Leonard indifferently. "Me cousin Mabel's gettin' married soon."

"Well, well! Last time I saw Mabel she were nobbut a bit of a kid wi' a mucky pinafore, as you might say. And nar she's gettin' wed. Who's t'chap?"

"Johnson, they call him. He works in the railway office—pen-pusher. You might think he owned it, to hear him talk. Lot o' swank! And Mabel's no kid now. She's over a year older than me, nearly as old as our Lily."

"You haven't said owt to our Lily yet, have you?" asked Mr. Oakroyd anxiously.

Leonard shook his head. "I haven't written her a letter for two months. She doesn't write to me. You'll be writing, won't you?"

What was he going to write? The thought chilled him, but warmth returned with the thought of Lily herself. If only she were here with him! But no, she was better out of it. He stared about him, then suddenly remembered

something. "Here," he cried, "where's Albert? I'd forgotten him."

"Gone. Went a fortnight since."

"Well, that's summat, anyhow. A bit o' yon Albert's talk nar 'ud just about put finishing touch on it. An' what's happened to him then?"

"Gettin' married this week." And Leonard grinned sardonically. "Got caught all right, Mr. Tuggridge did. Told him he would, but he wouldn't leave her alone. They didn't give him any option, neither, when they knew. Her father come to see him. Poor old Albert!" Yes, his days as a wandering gallant were over. No more ogling and pursuing and picking up for him. He had picked up once too often. He had "got caught" and would soon be seen with a perambulator.

"Poor owd nothing!" cried Mr. Oakroyd scornfully. "I'm sorry for t'lass as weds him. Gurt clever head—gasbag! An' that's no way for you to talk, neither, lad," he added severely. "'Got caught'! It maks me fair shamed to hear a lad o' mine talking that way. If I'd said owt o' that sort in front o' my father, he'd ha' ta'en a stick to my back, he would that. D'yer think t'lasses is nobbut for you to go follerin' round an' laking wi'? What d'yer think they are—bits o' toys?" He regarded his son sternly for a moment. "Ar yer doin' at yer work? Still wi' Gregson's?"

"Yes," Leonard replied, rather sulkily. "Doing all right. Got the second chair now and a lot of reg'lar customers. I'm making nearly four pounds a week."

"That's the style. Well, happen you'll be better off when you 'get caught' as you call it. Might knock a bit o' sense into you if a decent lass gets howd on you. You nivver knaw."

"Chap offered me a job in Manchester the other day," Leonard mumbled, "and I'd like to have taken it. More money and a change. I'm getting sick of Bruddersford. If —if owt happens to me mother I shall go." He swallowed hard.

Mr. Oakroyd relaxed the severity of his expression. "Ay, lad, you mun do whativver you think best. I've no call to be tellin' you what to do. An' whativver else you've done, you've noan been a bad lad to your mother."

Having said this, he cleared his throat, and looked sternly at the evening paper, as if he knew very well he could not believe a word it said. Leonard, muttering something about "a walk round," disappeared. Mr. Oakroyd read the paper through carefully, unhopefully, smoked a pipe or two and stared solemnly at the fire, then went to bed.

II

The Bruddersford Infirmary could not be mistaken for one of the local factories because it has no tall chimney. Otherwise there is little difference. It is a rambling ugly building, all in blackened stone and surrounded first by an asphalt courtyard, where the smuts drizzle ceaselessly, and then by tall iron railings that would not seem out of place around a prison. Through these railings a nurse may be seen occasionally, and as she flits across those grim spaces of stone and soot she looks like a being from another world, incredibly immaculate. Here, out of the sunlight, far from green shades and blue distances, where no birds sing, but where the lorries and steam-waggons come thundering down and the trams go groaning up the hill, here behind this rusting iron and walls thickened with black grime, the Bruddersfordians have a bout or two, a tussle, or a fight to a finish, with Death.

The last time Mr. Oakroyd had visited the Infirmary was to see a friend of his from Higden's, a good many years ago. He could hardly remember what it looked like inside. He was familiar enough with the outside, for the place was not quarter of a mile from Ogden Street and for years he had walked past it nearly every day. This morning, however, even the outside seemed strange. His wife was somewhere inside it, behind one of those dark windows.

"Is it special," asked the porter, "'cos this isn't visiting time, yer knaw."

"Well, I don't know fairly," said Mr. Oakroyd. "I wer sent for, like, an' I've come a long way."

"If yer'll howd on a minute, I'll see. What's t'name again? All right. Yer can wait in there." And the porter, after pointing to a door, turned away.

There were several people in the bare little waiting-room. One of them was an enormously fat woman, wrapped in a shawl. The tears were streaming down her face, and she made no attempt to dry her eyes, but repeated over and over again, without any variation of tone: "They nivver owt to ha' let him come in, nivver."

On the other side was an oldish man, whose drooping face Mr. Oakroyd dimly recognised. "Fower operations in eighteen months, that's what she's had," he was saying. "Fower operations." There was mournful pride in his voice. He looked round, nodded vaguely to Mr. Oakroyd, and then began again: "Ay, fower operations."

The others there, including two children, said nothing at all. They just waited, and Mr. Oakroyd had an obscure conviction that they had been waiting a long time. His heart sank. He wanted to go away.

The porter was standing at the door, beckoning to him. "Oakroyd, isn't it? That's Num-ber Twen-ty-sev-en, Lister Ward. Well, t'sister says she's very sorry but yer can't see 'er now but will you come again this afternoon."

"I see," said Mr. Oakroyd, and immediately found himself invaded by a feeling of relief. He tried to be disappointed, told himself he must see her as soon as he could, but nevertheless he could not help feeling relieved. He had been in there only a few minutes, had not really been inside, but even so it was comforting to be back again in the bustle of Woolgate. Something dogged him, however, throughout his stroll through the main streets. He was like a chap out on bail.

He called again in the early afternoon, only to be told

to return later. Then at last he was admitted. He climbed up four flights of stone steps and then found Lister Ward. A nurse met him at the entrance. "Let me see," she said, "you're for Number Seventeen—little Doris Smith—aren't you?"

When Mr. Oakroyd told her he was wanting Number Twenty-seven, she seemed disappointed, and this made him all the more uncomfortable, as if he had no right to be there.

"Yes, I remember now," she said, looking all round him but not at him. "Sister said you could see her, didn't she? You're the husband, aren't you? She hasn't been asking for you. There's a son, isn't there? I thought I'd seen him. This way then, and don't make too much noise. This isn't the proper visiting day, and you mustn't disturb the others."

He crept after her in a fashion that would not have disturbed a fly. He tiptoed so gently that his legs ached. They had to go almost the whole length of the ward, and though he tried to see as little of it as possible, he could not help noticing some things. All the women were in bed and they all seemed to have something blue on; some were old, some very young; some asleep, some staring fiercely; and there were strange things, pulley arrangements, on some of the beds; and one or two were completely surrounded by screens. No moaning and groaning; not a sound; it was all as quite as a waxwork show; all tidy and polished and still; very queer, frightening.

The nurse suddenly stopped. She turned round, looking right at him this time. "Your wife's very ill, you know," she whispered. "You must be very quiet with her. Don't mind if she's not very clear, wandering a little. Just a minute." She walked forward to a bed, and he heard her say: "Now Twenty-seven, your husband's come to see you." What else she said he did not know, but he saw her leaning over the bed, doing something, and then she stepped back and nodded to him. He tiptoed forward, feeling horribly

clumsy, uncertain. One hand, held behind him, was tightening, tightening, until its nails were digging into the horny palm. Then he stood by the bedside, looking down into the face of Number Twenty-seven.

"Eh, lass," he said huskily. He tried to smile, but could only make a grimace. "Nay—nay." And there seemed nothing more he could say.

Her face was all bone and sharp wrinkles and seemed as brittle as egg-shell. Her mouth was a short line, dark, bitter. But her eyes, though they wandered with an awful slowness, still gleamed in their hollows, and there looked out from those eyes the soul, stubborn, unflinching, ironic, of Mrs. Oakroyd. He himself could feel this, though he had no words for it. But an inner voice was saying "Eh, she'll nivver give in," and he stared at her in mingled pity and awe.

Her eyes roamed over him. She stirred a little and there came a sickly sweet smell. A hand travelled slowly over the folded sheet, and as he sat down he grasped it. His face was working desperately but to no purpose.

"Jess? What—what—you doing here?"

"Our Leonard sent."

At the mention of Leonard those eyes changed, softened. They would not do that for anything else now, it seemed.

"I didn't tell him to." Her voice was clear but slow, a voice speaking out of a dream.

"He thowt he'd better send word. He's been a good lad. I told him he's been a good lad to his mother."

"Time you thowt so," she said, with a flash of the old sharp spirit. "Ay, ay, a good lad . . . our Leonard. Is he coming soon?"

"Soon as he can or whenivver you want him," he told her.

She nodded, very slowly, so that it hurt him to watch her doing it. Then she looked away, at nothing it seemed, as if he was no longer there. He waited through a shrink-

ing and numbing silence. At last, however, she looked at him again, and it was as if she had returned from far away and was faintly surprised to find him still there. He tried to think of something to say, but there seemed to be nothing he could say and somehow his voice too had rusted away.

"I'm bad, Jess," she said finally.

His voice came back. "Eh, lass, why didn't you tell me afore?"

She did not seem to hear this. "I wish they'd let me alone," she muttered. "They can do nowt."

"Nay, they will," he said, and tried to convince himself that they could do something, though in his heart he knew they could not.

"Can't—can't I do owt?" he asked desperately.

To this she made no reply beyond looking at him searchingly, with a faint gleam of irony in her eyes. When it faded and she stirred again, it seemed as if he had been dismissed. Her hand crept out of his and moved uneasily over the sheet. When she spoke again, she began wandering. There was something about their Lily, about Higden's, about a peggy-tub she had borrowed; all a dreamy jumble. The nurse came up quietly and touched him on the shoulder. He stood up, looked on while she gave his wife something to drink.

"You'd better go now," she told him. But she withdrew for a moment.

His wife looked at him, steadily now. "Going, Jess, now, aren't yer? Yer managed all right for yersen when yer went away, didn't yer?"

"I nivver owt to ha' gone."

"Nay, lad, I don't know. You've done nowt to be sorry for. Couldn't be helped. Are yer going on all right?"

He nodded.

"Better so, then," she went on. "And our Leonard's doing right well. Eh, he is—right well!" She closed her eyes for a moment, then looked at him again, with the

wizened ghost of a smile. "Yer mun go and see our Lily some time if yer can get. That's what you've allus wanted, isn't it? Nay, Jess, I know. Tell our Leonard to come tonight."

This time, when he found himself outside in Woolgate again, he also found that he had not really left the Infirmary behind. It was the streets and shops, the trams and lorries, the whole noisy bustling business, that seemed grotesque, unreal, now. Half of him still went tiptoeing in that long room of beds and blue-covered shoulders, of pulley things and screens. The quiet of it remained with him and conjured away all the solid reality from the traffic of the streets. What was all the commotion about? Mr. Oakroyd did not say all these things to himself; he could not have found words for most of them; but nevertheless he felt them. You could have read them in his wondering glances as you passed him in the street.

When he went the next day, she was obviously weaker. Her eyes had a drugged look; she mumbled in her talk; and nearly everything she said was disconnected, wandering, the old wreckage of dreams and scattered memories. He sat there for an hour, staring sadly, squeezing his fingers, and then crept away, hurt, and frightened.

In the evening, he went again, with Leonard, and they were told they could go up to the ward. They were not admitted, however; the sister said it had been a mistake: Number Twenty-seven could not be seen just then. Perhaps it might be as well if they stayed some time in the waiting-room below. And they caught a glimpse through the door of screens round the bed. They waited an hour, two hours, turning over evening papers that seemed to say nothing, starting up every time the door was opened. It was late. They inquired again, and were told it was useless waiting any longer. There was no change; they must hope for the best; everything that could be done was being done. But next morning, before the earliest buzzers had sounded, Number Twenty-seven was dead.

After he had visited the cold little chapel, where the body would remain until the undertaker wanted it, they put into his hand a parcel wrapped in brown paper, and mechanically he accepted it and took it home, and mechanically he opened it there. Some clothes; a brush and comb; a little envelope, out of which rolled a wedding ring. There was something else in the envelope. False teeth.

"Eh, well I don't know!" cried Mrs. Sugden, who was for ever in the house now. "What they want to bother yer with them things for? Poor soul! They've ner more sense than—nay, I don't know!"

But Mr. Oakroyd only nodded and then stumped away.

III

He did what had to be done without protest. He helped Leonard to put something in the paper. He saw the undertaker and the insurance man. He sent a cable to Lily, and this alone of all his duties brought about a thaw inside his numbed self. When the man explained how it could be sent and when it would probably get there, he felt a sudden warmth and wanted to cry. For the rest, he did what he had to do, but was so quiet that his wife's relations, who came pouring in with her sister, Alice Bairstow, at their head, did not know what to make of him. Noisy and red-eyed but secretly rejoicing in their own immortality, they discussed him in corners. It was Mrs. Sugden's opinion that he was "taking it 'ard," but though her position as sympathetic neighbour and tea-brewer to the bereaved was recognised, it was held that her opinion on this matter was uncalled-for and therefore of no consequence. Mrs. Bairstow was heard to say that what really troubled her brother-in-law was remorse, as well it might. He had gone off God knows where and left her to it, and this is what had come of it. But she did not go so far as to say this to him. All she did was to deal with him in a spirit of large but strained tolerance, and make a great fuss of Leonard. Once

or twice Mr. Oakroyd glowered at her and was obviously on the point of saying something sharp, but most of the time he simply humped about, looking grey and wooden, and nodded agreement to everything she said. What she did say chiefly concerned the funeral, which was to be in the best traditions of Ogden Street. She sent out a host of invitations, and pledged the forthcoming insurance money royally.

It was on the morning of the funeral that Mr. Oakroyd received a letter. For a moment, he thought it must be from Lily, and his heart leaped up, but as soon as he saw it was not, he lost interest at once and stuffed it into his pocket without reading it. There would be plenty of time for that afterwards, when all the black fuss and bustle was over. This being a funeral in the grand tradition, it was a very lengthy affair. The assembly of the carriages and the mourners took some time. Then there was the long slow drive out to Dum Wood Cemetery, where serious Bruddersfordians go walking on fine Sunday afternoons, many a year before they are taken there to await the last trump. Then followed a service in the cemetery chapel, where the Rev. J. Hamilton Morris, B.A., of Woolgate Congregational Chapel, tried to dwell upon the virtues of the deceased and found it very difficult because he knew very little about her. He did what he could, however, looked manfully at the tear-stained or grim faces, and finally asked the grave where its victory was. And when all was done, there was the long drive back, not to 51, Ogden Street, but to Caddy's in Shuttle Street, where a funeral tea had been ordered. Caddy's, being old-fashioned, still made a speciality of these repasts, and on their business cards might be seen, sandwiched between *Catering* and *Wedding Cakes* the announcement: *Funeral Teas.* Mourners, mostly relations, still come considerable distances, and not only must they be refreshed but they must also be provided with an opportunity to exchange news, for many scattered families only meet at a funeral. It is not perhaps true to say

that these teas are the most jovial functions known to elderly Bruddersfordians, but it must be admitted that they are generally a success, going with a swing that many social events in Bruddersford never know. Everybody has that pleasant feeling of having carried through a painful duty; after a sight of the open grave, it is good to return to life, to eat and drink and swop news with uncles and cousins; and, moreover, what with long rides, services, and standing about in cemeteries, to say nothing of the havoc wrought by the emotions, a mourner develops a real appetite, and funeral teas are good solid meat teas. That is the reason why the comedian who plays the Dame in the Bruddersford pantomime never fails—has not failed these last thirty years—to bring down the house with the remark: "I buried 'im with 'am." On this occasion, Mrs. Bairstow had ordered Caddy's to provide a sound specimen of their knife-and-fork tea, and they had disappointed neither her nor any of her hopeful guests.

Among those who did full justice to both the ham and the tongue was Mr. Oakroyd's old friend and our old acquaintance, that independent craftsman and keeper of hens, Mr. Sam Oglethorpe. Here was one person Mr. Oakroyd could talk to, and though actually he did not do much talking, he kept close to Sam from the moment they all tramped up Caddy's stairs.

"Well, Jess," said Mr. Oglethorpe, "I'll ha' to be off. I've getten t'hens to see to, tha knaws. Farls can't wait if fowk can."

"Ay," said Mr. Oakroyd disconsolately. Then he brightened up. "Here, Sam, I'm coming wi' yer."

"Won't they want yer?" said Mr. Oglethorpe. They had wandered away from the tables now.

"If they do, they mun want on. Ther's nowt I can do here nar."

"Right, owd lad," said Mr. Oglethorpe cheerfully. "We'll get t'tram."

They said little or nothing, either on the tram or on

the walk to Wabley from the terminus, but they smoked companionably all the way, and Mr. Oakroyd did at least lose the feeling that he was wandering in an ugly dream. Sam might not be one of the brightest or have much to say for himself, but he was a comfortable sort of chap to be with at a time like this.

"I'll tell yer what," Mr. Oglethorpe suggested, when he had finished attending to his fowls, "we'll ha' a sup o' beer. Tha doesn't want to go on to *T'Anglers?* I thowt not. Well, I'll fetch a sup and we'll car quiet a bit i' t'hen-hoil. Nay, don't you come; I'll fetch it mysen."

This was that same combined hen-house and workshop where he had sat and talked to Sam and his nephew Ted, of the lorry, on a Sunday night that now seemed years and years away. It was while he was waiting in there that he remembered the letter in his pocket. It was from Miss Trant:

DEAR MR. OAKROYD:

I was so sorry to learn that your wife was ill and that you had to go home. I do hope that by this time you have better news of her. I have some news for you. Mr. Gooch has seen this man Ridvers, and he has frightened him into agreeing to pay the claim for damages. I don't know whether this is a very legal thing to do—it doesn't seem like it—but it is only right he should pay for his stupidity. It will cost him a good deal too, which means that I have been saved a good deal—thanks to you. Please remember this when you hear from Mr. Gooch, as you will very shortly. The other news is that Dr. MacFarlane and I are to be married very soon. We shall live just outside Gatford for a time. I'm afraid this means that a plan I had for offering you some work at Hitherton won't be possible now, though it was only vague. But will you please come and talk over your plans—unless you have already fixed something up for yourself? I have just had a very excited letter

from Susie in London. She has begun rehearsing already and likes her part.

Yours sincerely,

ELIZABETH TRANT.

He read this letter through twice, very carefully. He was glad that Miss Trant would not have to pay. He was also glad that she was marrying the big doctor chap. He told himself he was glad, yet he was conscious of feeling only a vague disappointment. The letter—a fine letter too—ought to have cheered him up, but it did not cheer him up. He was still numb, frozen, with just the tiniest bit of an ache somewhere.

There was a cosy gossiping look about Sam when he returned with his jugful. Mr. Oakroyd wanted to feel like that too, but somehow he couldn't manage it.

"Well, Jess," said Mr. Oglethorpe, in his usual slow, meditative, Jobbing Work style, "an' ar yer've been finding things down South?"

"Nay," said Mr. Oakroyd, "we've had bit o' bother just lately, bit of a mix-up, you might say." A week ago, he would have plunged at once into an account of the whole affair, but now he couldn't, not without an effort. It all seemed such a long way off, like a tale in a book.

"Ay, I dare say," said Mr. Oglethorpe, nodding and frowning judicially. Obviously it would not surprise what happened down South. "Been i' the-ater line, haven't yer, Jess? I did hear. An' what is ther to do i' that line o' business? Be a change from Higden's, eh? Diff'rent altogether, I'll be barnd?"

Mr. Oakroyd admitted that it was, and described briefly what he had been doing for the past six months. If he had been describing fairyland, his hearer could not have been more astonished and delighted, but though he felt a faint warmth at this reception of his news, a reception long anticipated, often imagined, he could not really be

kindled. And it was just the same when they came to talk of his travels.

"An' Bristol an' Bedfordsheer, Jess," cried Mr. Oglethorpe, "did yer ivver get theer?"

"Bristol an' Bedfordshire?" he repeated, puzzled.

"Nay, lad, don't yer remember? I mind it as well as if it wor nobbut yesterda'. Yer come here, it wor t'last time yer ivver wor here, an' yer wanted to be off somewheer—down South—an' I says 'Well, wheer d'yer want to go', an' yer says, 'Bristol an' Bedfordsheer', an' I laughs. An' then—by gow!—afore I can turn rahnd—yer've gone. Eh, I've had monny a good laugh ower it. I've been dahn to Bruddersford, we'll say, an' one o' t'chaps o' t'club has assed 'Wheer's Jess Oakroyd, Sam?' an' I've towd them. 'Bristol an' Bedfordsheer,' I says. 'Ar d'yer mean?' they says. 'Well, he come here,' I says, 'an' he says to me he'd like to go to Bristol an' Bedfordsheer, an' t'next minute he wor off,' I says. Don't tell me yer nivver went, Jess."

"I remember," said Mr. Oakroyd slowly. "Well, I nivver got to Bristol, Sam, though I've nivver given it a thowt. I may ha' seen Bedfordshire, but I don't knaw fairly. We've been all ower t'shop, up an' down an' across, on t'road, yer knaw. Ay, I've seen a deal."

"Then yer owt to be satisfied nar, lad," observed Mr. Oglethorpe, with a suggestion of irony. "Tell us wheer yer've been an' what yer've seen."

Mr. Oakroyd rubbed his chin. "That's a big order, Sam," he began, doubtfully. "When yer've been about a bit, places——"

Mr. Oglethorpe stopped him at once. He looked very reproachful, though waggish. "Nar, Jess," he cautioned, "yer not goin' to tell me 'at places is all alike when yer come to know 'em."

"Well, summat o' t'sort," Mr. Oakroyd muttered.

His friend instantly banged the table. "Them's t'words, very words, 'at our Ted used i' this very place that Sunda'," he roared. "Very words he said. An' yer said 'Nay, I'll

be damned if I'll ha' that.' And I backed yer up. Our Ted wor only talking abart it t'other week here, when he wor wondering where yer'd got to. Well, well, well! That caps t'lot. We live an' we learn, we live an' we learn. Nay, Jess!"

"Howd thi noise, Sam!" Mr. Oakroyd protested good-humouredly. But he looked, and felt, confused. "I don't mean all places is alike. Your Ted wor wrong. He went too far, too far bi half, he did. What I think is this——"

"Nay, Jess, leave it, lad, leave it nar. Say ner more. Here, have another sup o' beer. Bit better ner like, this beer. If they don't look aht, they'll be puttin' some malt an' hops in it agen, same as they used to, instead o' just colourin' t'reservoy watter an' fillin' t'barrels wi' that. Well, what's t'next job then, lad? Still in t'the-ater line?"

Mr. Oakroyd did not know, and he hardly seemed to care. He had asked himself this question several times but somehow had found it quite easy to leave it unanswered. It was as if something inside him had just snapped. "I don't knaw," he replied, blowing out his breath in what was recognised to be the Bruddersfordian equivalent of a sigh. "I don't, Sam. There was a bit o' talk about me gettin' summat else i' t'same line, but I don't knaw what'll come of it. I haven't thowt about it. I suppose I mun be looking round."

Mr. Oglethorpe nodded sagely. Then he looked very grave. "Keep aht o' t'Joinery an' Jobbing i' this neighbourhood, Jess, that's all. Way things is nar, it's nowt—nowt at all, it isn't. It's just like t'hens scrattin' for a bit o' summat."

"Is it war ner it wor?" inquired Mr. Oakroyd.

"Nay, trade's so bad and ther's so monny either stopped or on short time, they'll ha' nowt done, d'yer see, Jess? They'd let t'places go to rack an' ruin afore they'd have owt done. Sitha, I can't put me nose in onnywheer withart seeing hawf-a-dozen little jobs 'at wants doing. But fowk hasn't bit o' brass to spare. They can't thoil it, lad. I've

nearly made as mich aht o' t'hens. I've been keepin' farls nar for fowerteen year, an' I shan't be capped if at finish t'farls is keepin' me. So don't set up for thysen on t'Joinery an' Jobbing i' these parts, Jess. Might be diff'rent dahn South, I dare say, but here—it's nowt. Keep to t'the-ater line, I say, 'cos fowk seems to ha' brass to spend on the-aters an' t'animated picters an' suchlike these days when they haven't a sixpence for owt beside. Has ta' 'ad onny young actresses i' tow, Jess?"

"Nay, Sam, who d'yer think I am?" But Mr. Oakroyd was not shocked. He had replied almost mechanically.

It occurred to Mr. Oglethorpe then that this was hardly the time for such badinage—the clay of Dum Wood Cemetery being hardly dry on their boots yet—and hastily and awkwardly he changed the subject. But he could not change his friend's heavy and abstracted mood, and soon their talk dwindled to nothing. Mr. Oakroyd returned home accompanied by a dark confusion of thoughts and memories, in which his adventures on the road, all the ups and downs of *The Good Companions,* had their place. Yet they were only like shadows flickering on a wall. He wanted to see them all again, these *Good Companions;* he could dwell affectionately on his thought of them; but nevertheless they were little figures, far away, and he realised, in his own dumb obscure fashion, that it was not they who had the power to wake him back to life. Nor was it anybody or anything in Bruddersford. He walked slowly through the familiar streets, a shrunken figure in an ill-fitting suit of black, solitary beneath the street lamps that only intensified the great dark above, a man alone. No, not entirely alone, for keeping step with him were immense vague shapes, so many configurations of mystery, pain and death.

IV

"Then we mun sell t'home up," said Mr. Oakroyd, early the next morning. He was looking disconsolately across the table at Leonard, who had just announced that

he had decided to take the job he had been offered in Manchester.

"No good keepin' it if you're not going to stop in Bruddersford," said Leonard.

"Well, I'm not," his father remarked quietly.

"What are you going to do?"

"Wait a bit, lad, wait a bit. I'll see." Mr. Oakroyd was rather irritable now. "We can't all be barbers wi' jobs i' Manchester round t'corner, can we?"

"I was only askin'," said Leonard, a sulky boy again.

"That's all right, lad. Tak' no notice. I'm glad you can look after yersen. Yer doin' right well, Leonard, an' if you'd nobbut settle a bit an' not go malackin' abart so much wi' t'girls——"

"I've 'ad enough of that," said Leonard, who believed at the moment that he had.

"That's all right, then. You'll do champion," said Mr. Oakroyd, regarding his son for once with something like approval. "Well, we'll ha' to sell up. Ar's it's got to be done, that's t'point? We're havin' no auctionin'."

"Wouldn't be worth it anyway," said Leonard, with a glance round the room. "Not enough stuff here."

"By gow!—we live an' learn. I thowt once upon a time I'd getten a good home together," cried Mr. Oakroyd, with some bitterness, "but seemingly it's not worth sellin' up nar."

"Best thing we can do," said Leonard, wisely disregarding this outburst, "is to get one or two of these second-hand furniture chaps in, and they'll offer a price. Albert'll tell me who's the best. I'll go and see him this morning if you like."

"All right." Mr. Oakroyd looked about him now. "I wonder if ther's owt our Lily 'ud like for hersen," he mused.

"Dare say there might." Leonard lit a cigarette. "But she'll have a better place of her own now. Jack Clough gets good money out there."

"I'll look abart a bit. Then if ther's owt I think she could do wi', I'll pack it up in a box." He suddenly remembered something. "Eh, whativver I do, I'll ha' to go back to Gatford. I left my tools."

Leonard stared at him. "Gor, you made me jump, Par! Is that all? Tools!"

"Ay, tools, lad, tools! It's enough an' all. I'm a tradesman, I am, an' I can't set mysen up wi' a pair o' scissors an' a pair o' clippers an' a drop o' hair-oil. I want summat to work wi' when I start. An' I been using some o' them tools for twenty year, an' don't you forget it. I wouldn't be wi'out 'em for owt. I'm a tradesman, see—an' if you ask me, ther's noan so damn monny on us left."

"Can you wonder," said Leonard, with all the scorn of a younger and wiser generation, "wages they pay?"

"Happen not," said his father gloomily. "For all that, a chap 'at's learnt his trade an' can use his hands—he isn't a machine an' he isn't a flippin' monkey—he's a man, lad, wages or no wages, a *man.*" And he gave the table a bang. It was immediately answered by another, at the door. "Hello, who's this?"

"Postman. I'll go." And when Leonard came back, he added: "One for me and one for you."

Mr. Oakroyd had been told by Miss Trant that he would hear from Mr. Gooch of Gatford, but nevertheless he was astonished. He was even more astonished when the following little bombshell had exploded under his nose:

DEAR SIR:

Following the instructions of our client, Miss E. Trant, upon the satisfactory termination of our negotiations with Mr. Ridvers, we have pleasure in handing you herewith our cheque, on behalf of Miss Trant, for £100 (one hundred pounds) receipt of which kindly acknowledge to us as well as to Miss Trant herself.

Yours faithfully,

GORING, SON AND GOOCH.

And there it was, with the letter, a little bit of blue and white paper: *Pay Mr. J. Oakroyd or Order.* A hundred pounds. Nay!

"Here," he shouted to Leonard, "I've getten a hundred pound. Eh, it's aht o' all reason. A hundred pound! That's right, isn't it?"

"Well I'll be blowed! What you got that for, Par? Let's have a look at it. That's right. It's a cheque, that is. But what you got it for?"

"Well, I did a bit o' puttin' two an' two together for this Miss Trant I been workin' for. Must ha' saved a good deal, I dare say, but this is aht o' all reason. Nay—a hundred pound!"

"Depends what you did, doesn't it?" said Leonard, looking very knowing.

Mr. Oakroyd explained briefly what he had done.

"Well, that's it then," said Leonard. "You might have saved her a right lot—'spect you did,—wish I had it." He inspected the cheque again. "I know a bit about these things. You can't cash this, y'know, Par, 'cos it's got Company written on. You'll have to pay it into t'bank."

"What bank? Haven't got a bank, though I once had a bit in t'Post Office. An' I'd some trade on gettin' owt aht on 'em an' all."

"You goes to bank with this, and you pays it in," Leonard explained, proud of his knowledge of high finance, "and then if you want it—money, y'know—you take it out again. That's way you do it."

"Put it in an' tak' it aht," cried Mr. Oakroyd, puzzled. "I call that daft. Still, if that's t'way, I'll do it. An' I mun do some o' this kindly acknowledgin' too. Eh, but—a hundred pound!" And he stared at his son in bewilderment.

"Come in handy, that little lot," said Leonard, who was now slipping into the part of the knowing young man. "That and what you'll get from selling up here, it'll give you a good old start all right."

"Nay, I can't keep all I get from selling t'home up," Mr. Oakroyd protested. "You mun have half, Leonard. We might get summat for our Lily an' all. Onny road, we'll divide an' make a divvy on it."

"Our Lily won't want anything. She's well off, she is. And I don't," added Leonard, who, to give him his due, was not a grasping youth. "Keep it yourself, Par. What there is, is yours all right. But we shan't get much, I can tell you now. I'll go and ask Albert."

As soon as he was left alone, Mr. Oakroyd began rummaging about to see if there was anything that Lily might like. He wandered upstairs, spending quite a time there, looking not at little old possessions but at the very past itself, so that times, seasons, occasions, events, he had almost entirely forgotten returned all clear and bright but very small, part of a melancholy enchantment.

A slight noise from downstairs called him into the immediate present again. He descended quietly, to discover in the living-room, just by the old sofa, what looked like a hillock of dirty blue serge. The next moment it turned itself into Mrs. Sugden rising from her knees, panting, purple-faced, and a trifle confused.

"Mornin', Mrs. Sugden," he said, rather dryly, "I couldn't think what it wor."

"Eh, Mr. Oakroyd, I 'ope yer don't mind," she cried, puffing and blowing. "I looked in to see if there was owt I could do for yer, an' your Leonard towed me as he was passin' yer were sellin' up an' I were just 'aving a look at t'sofa. I've been wantin' one for some time an' I thowt I might as well 'ave it if it's goin' just as well as t'next."

"Ay," he said, wagging his head at her in a kind of half-mournful, half-humorous resignation. "So you might, Mrs. Sugden. Tak' a look while you've a chance. Here today and gone to-morn, that's our motto." And he left her to it, but now, when he looked round upstairs, there was only so much furniture and odds and ends all worse for

wear, just old junk. He had to comfort himself with a pipe of *Old Salt.*

And then it happened.

"Mr. Oakroyd, Mr. Oakroyd," she was screaming up the stairs, "there's summat come for yer." And when he hurried down, she added, holding something out to him: "Looks like a sort o' telegram."

It was a cable. Trembling, Mr. Oakroyd put his pipe down on the table, and even then only opened the envelope with difficulty. He stared, breathing hard. *Very grieved all love if you come out here very welcome and good job any time Lily Jack.* Again and again he read it, making sure. And then it was as if a huge door had been opened and the sunlight was flooding in, warming him to life again.

"An' will yer go?" asked Mrs. Sugden, when at last he had satisfied her curiosity. "Eh, it's a long way off."

"Long way! Long nowt! If it were from here to t'moon I'd go."

And Mrs. Sugden, hearing the terrible voice of love triumphant, was silenced. No doubt she knew that when this voice peals out, all other voices in the universe are nothing but reedy whispers, better silent. Perhaps she acquired the sofa as a reward for recognising these authentic tones.

Another person heard them that morning. This was the young man at Torry's Shipping Agency in Shuttle Street. He looked up from his book to see a detestable, cheap, black suit, a mouth that was in earnest, and two blue eyes that blazed with excitement.

"Nar, lad," said this caller, in the usual and regrettable Bruddersford manner, "just tell me how I can get to Canada."

The young man put away his book and took out a pencil. This sounded like business. "Assisted passage, I suppose?"

"Ar d'you mean?"

The young man began to explain about emigration and government grants and forms to fill in, but he was quickly cut short.

"Nowt o' that," said Mr. Oakroyd. "Ther's no government i' this. I'm payin' for mysen. I can manage third class nicely."

"Then that's different," said the young man, who now began to talk about the various routes and steamship lines. "Of course it depends on where you want to go to at the other end. But we might begin with this end first. You could go from either Liverpool or Southampton."

"Champion!" cried Mr. Oakroyd.

"Yes, either Liverpool or Southampton."

"Good enough!" Then, after some thought, he went on: "Nar I fancy Southampton, an' I'll tell yer for why. I'd like to call at a place i' t'Midlands—Gatford—an' then I'd like to go to London on t'way, 'cos ther's some friends o' mine there 'at I'd like to see afore I go. So we'll mak' it Southampton, lad."

"Good! Southampton." And the young man flourished his pencil. "What part of Canada are you going to? We could probably arrange to book you right through."

"Yer a smart young feller, I can see," said Mr. Oakroyd in great delight. "Just get your map aht an' I'll show yer where I want to go. It's where my dowter lives an' I can put me finger on t'very place. Yer knaw abaht Canada, do yer? Ay, well, you an' me'ull mak' a right good job on it."

For the next hour that young man of Torry's never returned to his book. On the other hand, he did not miss it. Life had walked into the shop.

V

It is Saturday afternoon again, and once more something queer is happening in that narrow thoroughfare to the west of the town, Manchester Road. A grey-green tide

flows sluggishly down the road, a tide of cloth caps, leaving the ground of "t'United," where Huddersfield have just been defeated by three goals to two. Somewhere in the middle of this thick stream of cloth caps is one that looks newer than most of its neighbours. It belongs to Mr. Jesiah Oakroyd, who has contrived to attend this match before leaving Bruddersford for years, perhaps for ever. He is catching a train to Gatford, his first little halt on his long journey, this very evening, and already his suit-case and his big tin trunk are at the station, waiting for the 6.50. Casual talk is easy in such a slowly moving throng and is favoured because it helps to pass the time even when it does not also relieve the feelings. Mr. Oakroyd is engaged in it. We can just overhear a sentence or two.

"Ay," his neighbour observes, "if they'd nobbut laked like this all t'season they'd ha' been somewhere at the top instead of being nearly at bottom. They're just wak'ning up nar it's nearly ower."

"Well, it's been a grand match to-day, it has," says Mr. Oakroyd dreamily. "I nivver want to see a better. Eh, it were t'owd form all ower agen. Them last two goals—nay, by gow!"

"Ay, them wor a bit of all right."

"All right! They wor *grand!*"

And then we hear no more. The tide of caps and men flows on, slowly but gradually gathering speed, like our years. It recedes, shrinks, until at last you do not notice it at all. Manchester Road is now only one of a hundred thoroughfares, for Bruddersford itself, the whole spread of it, has come into view. Holdsworth's giant mill looms there on the left; the Midland Railway's station glitters in the sun again, and there is an answering gleam from the glass roof of the Market Hall; a silver streak shows one of the canals; and in the centre of the tall chimneys, shaking the air with its *Lass of Richmond Hill,* is the tower of the Bruddersford Town Hall. It points a finger at us, and then is gone, lost in a faint smudge of smoke. Another

moment and Bruddersford is only a grimy crack in the hills. The high moorland between Yorkshire and Lancashire rises steadily, clear in the pearly light of Spring. Once more, the miles and miles of ling and bog and black rock, and the curlews crying above the scattered jewellery of the little tarns. There are the Derbyshire hills, and there, away to the north, are the great fells of Cumberland, and now the whole darkening length of it, from the Peak to Cross Fell, is visible, for this is the Pennine Range, sometimes called the backbone of England.

EPILOGUE

BEING A MERE POSTSCRIPT ADDRESSED TO THOSE WHO INSIST UPON HAVING ALL THE LATEST NEWS

No, Susie has not married Inigo. On the other hand, she has not married anybody else. There have been times when rumours and little paragraphs in the gossip columns have sent Inigo flying round to see her (not that he is not always seeing her), but she has laughed and told him not to be silly. Once, it is true, there was real danger—for, after all, nobody can deny that Sir Douglas Heath-Watchett is an extremely attractive young man—and that was the time when poor Inigo, convinced that all was lost, fled to Norway and tried to fish. He returned, however, to find Susie still laughing and Sir Douglas booking a passage to Florida, where there are fish even larger than those in Norway. Susie says she is too young to marry yet and that life is too amusing. When she finds herself on the point of being relegated to minor parts, or, alternatively, when there is no more fun in being a star comedienne with a huge and rapturous public of her own, then, she declares, she will grab the first nice man she sees and hurl him into the nearest registry office. No doubt Inigo will contrive to be that man.

He has the best chance, for he sees her almost every other day, and they go here, there, and everywhere together. Both of them—as everybody should realise by this time—make absurdly large sums of money. Susie talks gravely enough about her salary, being nothing if not a child of the theatre, but to Inigo the whole thing is still an elaborate joke. He watches with droll amazement the rising tide of performing fees, sheet music royalties, gramophone royalties, and so forth. Mr. Pitsner still seems a quite unreal person, and Inigo would never be very surprised if the money Mr. Pitsner hands over suddenly melted into thin air or turned, like fairy gold, into a heap of withered leaves on the bank counter. It is incredible that he should make so much money out of what seems to him a mere parlour trick. His writing, however, is a very serious business. He has published a volume of essays, so sternly literary that it is almost impossible to read them, entitled *The Last Knapsack and Other Papers*. The only copy ever seen is in Miss Dean's dressing-room. She pretends to laugh at it, but in secret she is rather proud of the fact that it is dedicated "To Susie, the Best Companion," and she is determined to read it all through, one day. Inigo says that the book has had such a poor sale simply because he was foolish enough to publish it at his own expense. The next book, now in preparation, is to be brought out at the expense of the publisher, who will then be compelled, Inigo declares, to make everybody read it.

Sometimes, but chiefly in the way of business, they meet Jerry Jerningham, who is, perhaps, rather plumper than he was, in spite of diet and massage and exercises. He is, of course, one of the most successful young men on the light musical stage. Now that he has triumphantly acquired an American accent, a perpetual reminder of his season on Broadway, he is busy building his own theatre. The fact that it is to have no pit is desolating many of the outer suburbs. Mrs. Jerningham is not a public figure, and, indeed, is rarely seen these days. Now and then, however, she lunches with Susie, who listens very sympathetically to an account of all her troubles. This account is always liberally punctuated with the cry: "But don't think for a moment, my dear, that I'm sorry I married him."

Jimmy Nunn, Joe, and Mrs. Joe are still in concert party work, and lately concluded a successful season with "The Red Revellers" at either Rhyl or Llandudno. Jimmy's digestion is beginning to trouble him again, and he admits that he is not as young as he was, so that the sooner he is

able to run a little show of his own, the better. There is some talk of his managing it this coming season. George is still something of a charge on his parents, being apprenticed to the motor trade, but very soon he will be earning his own living, and then Joe and Mrs. Joe will—as they say—"look about for something." What that something will be they have not yet quite decided. Joe still favours a seaside hotel, and Elsie Dulver, who saw them at Eastbeach, has promised her assistance in finding one, and Inigo and Susie have both offered them a substantial loan. Mr. Morton Mitcham is no longer a performer; he has gone into management—at least, that is how he puts it—though actually he is nothing more nor less than the manager of the pier at—where do you think?—why, of all places, Sandybay. He is now one of the figures of the town, and is for ever discovering old acquaintances from the East among the anglers who drink Scotch every morning and evening in the little bar at the end of the pier. He is regarded with something like awe by every younger member of a visiting troupe, because, it appears, it was he and no other who discovered Susie Dean and Jerry Jerningham, and those who doubt his word are invited to call at his lodgings and see for themselves certain bills, programmes, and photographs.

The McFarlanes have settled in Edinburgh, where Hugh has a fine practice and also lectures grimly at the University from time to time. He has published a very small book with an enormous title—it begins with *Some Observations on the Parathyroid Glands,* and then goes on and on, *With Special Reference,* and so forth—and Paris and Vienna think there is something in it, whereas Leipzig and Chicago are not very sure. Mrs. McFarlane is even less certain, but, on the other hand, is positive that though Hugh is doing far too much, he is looking much better than he did, don't you think? I am sorry to say that Mrs. McFarlane, though the wife of one of Edinburgh's most respected citizens and the delighted mother of two small and very fat boys, has a secret vice. Now and again she likes to sneak away, buy

The Stage, and devour it in a corner. If you went in very quickly, you might easily catch her, one day, smiling at the advertisements: "Wanted Known. . . . A Riot at Little Sandmouth, last . . ." Sometimes Hugh has to go up to London, and then she tears herself away from the fat little boys and accompanies him, and then she sees Susie and Inigo and perhaps watches Jerry's beautiful capers from a stall. There are letters, too, of course. Incidentally, it is surprising what letters Mrs. Joe can write. The matter is humble enough—the old stories of pier pavilion audiences, queer lodgings, and Sunday trains—but the penmanship is at once flowing and exquisite, and the style worthy of Lord Chesterfield himself. I do not say that Mrs. Joe always writes like this, but those are the sort of letters Mrs. McFarlane receives from her, once in a while.

Then there is Mr. Oakroyd, far away in Canada, or, to be exact, at Pittford Falls, Ontario. Here we come to a difficulty. The trouble is that nobody has been out to Canada and that any news of him can only trickle through those craggy little letters of his. It is certain that he is a very proud grandfather, that he and his son-in-law, Jack Clough, are now running some good, solid tradesmanlike business of their own, and that everybody there is very well, thank you. I know that Mr. Oakroyd does not live with his daughter, but has a little place of his own just down the road, where he can smoke a pipe over his three weeks' old copy of the Saturday sports edition of the *Bruddersford Evening Express,* which is sent out to him regularly by S. Oglethorpe, Town End, Wabley, Yorks. Moreover, I gather that Pittford Falls regard him as a man with vast theatrical experience and a topographical authority on the Mother Country. The photographs that Susie sent out, and the box of gramophone records, including *Slippin' Round the Corner* sung and played in half a dozen different ways, that Inigo gave him, these things have only confirmed and increased his reputation. There is no doubt that he is enjoying life, but apparently there are drawbacks. Thus it seems that Pittford Falls has a nasty trick of being either

too hot or too cold; there are no cosy little public-houses, and the club that he has joined is not really an adequate substitute; the tobacco is too sweet, not a patch on *Old Salt;* stoves are not up to much when you have been used to sitting in front of a kitchen range, where there has been a bit of baking going on, perhaps, during the day; and there is a queer, empty look about the place. For some time now, I hear, they have been planning a trip to the Old Country, and Mr. Oakroyd admits that he longs for a sight of good old Bruddersford. Whether he is as happy there as he thought he would be I do not know, though not for the world would he venture far from Lily and the two children, for they are all for ever having "a bit o' fun." We must leave it at that. In this place, whether we call it Bruddersford or Pittford Falls, perfection is not to be found, neither in men nor in the lot they are offered, to say nothing of the tales we tell of them, these hints and guesses, words in the air and gesticulating shadows, these stumbling chronicles of a dream of life.

THE END

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