GEORGE GISSING

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Gissing G.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
AMONG THE HILLS

There were three at the breakfast-table—Mr. Newthorpe, his daughter Annabel, and their visitor (Annabel's Cousin), Miss Paula Tyrrell. It was a small, low, soberly-furnished room, the walls covered with carelessly-hung etchings and water-colours, and with photographs which were doubtless mementoes of travel; dwarf bookcases held overflowings from the library; volumes in disorder, clearly more for use than ornament. The casements were open to let in the air of a July morning. Between the thickets of the garden the eye caught glimpses of sun-smitten lake and sheer hillside; for the house stood on the shore of Ullswater.

Of the three breakfasting, Miss Tyrrell was certainly the one whose presence would least allow itself to be overlooked. Her appetite was hearty, but it scarcely interfered with the free flow of her airy talk, which was independent of remark or reply from her companions. Though it was not apparent in her demeanour, this young lady was suffering under a Calamity; her second 'season' had been ruined at its very culmination by a ludicrous *contretemps* in the shape of an attack of measles. Just when she flattered herself that she had never looked so lovely, an instrument of destiny embraced her in the shape of an affectionate child, and lo! she was a fright. Her constitution had soon thrown off the evil thing, but Mrs. Tyrrell decreed her banishment for a time to the remote dwelling of her literary uncle. Once more Paula was lovely, and yet one could scarcely say that the worst was over, seeing that she was constrained to pass summer days within view of Helvellyn when she might have been in Piccadilly.

Mr. Newthorpe seldom interrupted his niece's monologue, but his eye often rested upon her, seemingly in good-natured speculation, and he bent his head acquiescingly when she put in a quick 'Don't you think so?' after a running series of comments on some matter which smacked exceedingly of the town. He was not more than five-and-forty, yet had thin, grizzled hair, and a sallow face with lines of trouble deeply scored upon it. His costume was very careless—indeed, all but slovenly—and his attitude in the chair showed, if not weakness of body, at all events physical indolence.

Some word that fell from Paula prompted him to ask:

'I wonder where Egremont is?'

Annabel, who had been sunk in thought, looked up with a smile. She was about to say something, but her cousin replied rapidly:

'Oh, Mr. Egremont is in London—at least, he was a month ago.'

'Not much of a guarantee that he is there now,' Mr. Newthorpe rejoined.

'I'll drop him a line and see,' said Paula. 'I meant to do so yesterday, but forgot. I'll write and tell him to send me a full account of himself. Isn't it too bad that people don't write to me? Everybody forgets you when you're out of town in the season. Now you'll see I shan't have a single letter again this morning; it is the cruellest thing!'

'But you had a letter yesterday, Paula,' Annabel remarked.

'A letter? Oh, from mamma; that doesn't count. A letter isn't a letter unless you feel anxious to see what's in it. I know exactly all that mamma will say, from beginning to end, before I open the envelope. Not a scrap of news, and with her opportunities, too! But I can count on Mr. Egremont for at least four sides—well, three.'

'But surely he is not a source of news?' said her uncle with surprise.

'Why not? He can be very jolly when he likes, and I know he'll write a nice letter if I ask him to. You can't think how much he's improved just lately. He was down at the Ditchleys' when we were there in February; he and I had ever such a time one day when the others were out hunting. Mamma won't let me hunt; isn't it too bad of her? He didn't speak a single serious word all the morning, and just think how dry he used to be! Of course he can be dry enough still when he gets with people like Mrs. Adams and Clara Carr, but I hope to break him of the habit entirely.'

She glanced at Annabel, and laughed merrily before raising her cup to her lips. Mr. Newthorpe just cast a rapid eye over his daughter's face; Annabel wore a look of quiet amusement.

'Has he been here since then?' Paula inquired, tapping a second egg. 'We lost sight of him for two or three months, and of course he always makes a mystery of his wanderings.'

'We saw him last in October,' her uncle answered, 'when he had just returned from America.'

'He said he was going to Australia next. By-the-by, what's his address? Something, Russell Street. Don't you know?'

'No idea,' he replied, smiling.

'Never mind. I'll send the letter to Mrs. Ormonde; she always knows where he is, and I believe she's the only one that does.'

When the meal came to an end Mr. Newthorpe went, as usual, to his study. Miss Tyrrell, also as usual, prepared for three hours of letter-writing. Annabel, after a brief Consultation with Mrs. Martin, the housekeeper, would ordinarily have sat down to study in the morning room. She laid open a book on the table, but then lingered between that and the windows. At length she took a volume of a lighter kind—in both senses—and, finding her garden hat in the hall, went forth.

She was something less than twenty, and bore herself with grace perchance a little too sober for her years. Her head was wont to droop thoughtfully, and her step measured itself to the grave music of a mind which knew the influence of mountain solitude. But her health was complete; she could row for long stretches, and on occasion fatigued her father in rambles over moor and fell. Face and figure were matched in mature beauty; she had dark hair, braided above the forehead on each side, and large dark eyes which regarded you with a pure intelligence, disconcerting if your word uttered less than sincerity.

When her mother died Annabel was sixteen. Three months after that event Mr. Newthorpe left London for his country house, which neither he nor his daughter had since quitted. He had views of his own on the subject of London life as it affects young ladies. By nature a student, he had wedded a woman who became something not far removed from a fashionable beauty. It was a passionate attachment on both sides at first, and to the end he loved his wife with the love which can deny nothing. The consequence was that the years of his prime were wasted, and the intellectual promise of his youth found no fulfilment. Another year and Annabel would have entered the social mill; she had beauty enough to achieve distinction, and the means of the family were ample to enshrine her. But she never 'came out.' No one would at first believe that Mr. Newthorpe's retreat was final; no one save a close friend or two who understood what his life had been, and how he dreaded for his daughter the temptations which had warped her mother's womanhood. 'In any case,' wrote Mrs. Tyrrell, his sister-in-law, when a year and a half had gone by, 'you will of course let me have Annabel shortly. I pray you to remember that she is turned seventeen. You surely won't deprive her of every pleasure and every advantage?' And the recluse made answer: 'If bolts and shackles were needful I would use them mercilessly rather than allow my girl to enter your Middlesex pandemonium. Happily, the fetters of her reason suffice. She is growing into a woman, and by the blessing of the gods her soul shall be blown through and through with the free air of heaven whilst yet the elements in her are blending to their final shape.' Mrs. Tyrrell raised her eyebrows, and shook her head, and talked sadly of 'poor Annabel,' who was buried alive.

She walked down to a familiar spot by the lake, where a rustic bench was set under shadowing leafage; in front two skiffs were moored on the strand. The sky was billowy with slow-travelling

shapes of whiteness; a warm wind broke murmuring wavelets along the pebbly margin. The opposite slopes glassed themselves in the deep dark water—Swarth Fell, Hallin Fell, Place Fell—one after the other; above the southern bend of the lake rose noble summits, softly touched with mist which the sun was fast dispelling. The sweetness of summer was in the air. So quiet was it that every wing-rustle in the brake, every whisper of leaf to leaf, made a distinct small voice; a sheep-dog barking over at Howtown seemed close at hand.

This morning Annabel had no inclination to read, yet her face was not expressive of the calm reflection which was her habit. She opened the book upon her lap and glanced down a page or two, but without interest. At length external things were wholly lost to her, and she gazed across the water with continuance of solemn vision. Her face was almost austere in this mood which had come upon her.

Someone was descending the path which led from the high road; it was a step too heavy for Paula's, too rapid to be Mr. Newthorpe's. Annabel turned her head and saw a young man, perhaps of seven-and-twenty, dressed in a light walking-suit, with a small wallet hanging from his shoulder and a stick in his hand. At sight of her he took off his cap and approached her bare-headed.

'I saw from a quarter of a mile away,' he said, 'that someone was sitting here, and I came down on the chance that it might be you.'

She rose with a very slight show of surprise, and returned his greeting with calm friendliness.

'We were speaking of you at breakfast. My cousin couldn't tell us for certain whether you were in England, though she knew you were in London a month ago.'

'Miss Tyrrell is with you?' he asked, as if it were very unexpected.

'But didn't you know? She has been ill, and they sent her to us to recruit.'

'Ah! I have been in Jersey for a month; I have heard nothing.'

'You were able to tear yourself from London in mid-season?'

'But when was I a devotee of the Season, Miss Newthorpe?'

'We hear you progress in civilisation.'

'Well, I hope so. I've had a month of steady reading, and feel better for it. I took a big chest of books to Jersey. But I hope Miss Tyrrell is better?'

'Quite herself again. Shall we walk up to the house?'

'I have broken in upon your reading.'

She exhibited the volume; it was Buskin's 'Sesame and Lilies.'

'Ah! you got it; and like it?'

'On the whole.'

'That is disappointing.'

Annabel was silent, then spoke of another matter as they walked up from the lake.

This Mr. Egremont had not the look of a man who finds his joy in the life of Society. His clean-shaven face was rather bony, and its lines expressed independence of character. His forehead was broad, his eyes glanced quickly and searchingly, or widened themselves into an absent gazing which revealed the imaginative temperament. His habitual cast of countenance was meditative, with a tendency to sadness. In talk he readily became vivacious; his short sentences, delivered with a very clear and conciliating enunciation, seemed to indicate energy. It was a peculiarity that he very rarely smiled, or perhaps I should say that he had the faculty of smiling only with his eyes. At such moments his look was very winning, very frank in its appeal to sympathy, and compelled one to like him. Yet, at another time, his aspect could be shrewdly critical; it was so when Annabel fell short of enthusiasm in speaking of the book he had recommended to her when last at Ullswater. Probably he was not without his share of scepticism. For all that, it was the visage of an idealist.

Annabel led him into the house and to the study door, at which she knocked; then she stood aside for him to enter before her. Mr. Newthorpe was writing; he looked up absently, but light gathered in his eyes as he recognised the visitor.

'So here you are! We talked of you this morning. How have you come?'

'On foot from Pooley Bridge.'

They clasped hands, then Egremont looked behind him; but Annabel had closed the door and was gone.

She went up to the room in which Paula sat scribbling letters.

'Ten minutes more!' exclaimed that young lady. 'I'm just finishing a note to mamma—so dutiful!'

'Have you written to Mr. Egremont?'

Paula nodded and laughed.

'He is downstairs.'

Paula started, looking incredulous.

'Really, Bell?'

'He has just walked over from Pooley Bridge.'

'Oh, Bell, do tell me! Have those horrid measles left any trace? I really can't discover any, but of course one hasn't good eyes for one's own little speckles. Well, at all events, everybody hasn't forgotten me. But do look at me, Bell.'

Her cousin regarded her with conscientious gravity.

'I see no trace whatever; indeed, I should say you are looking better than you ever did.'

'Now that's awfully kind of you. And you don't pay compliments, either. Shall I go down? Did you tell him where I was?'

Had Annabel been disposed to dainty feminine malice, here was an opportunity indeed. But she looked at Paula with simple curiosity, seeming for a moment to lose herself. The other had to repeat her question.

'I mentioned that you were in the house,' she replied. 'He is talking with father.'

Paula moved to the door, but suddenly paused and turned.

'Now I wonder what thought you have in your serious head?' she said, merrily. 'It's only my fun, you know.'

Annabel nodded, smiling.

'But it is only my fun. Say you believe me. I shall be cross with you if you put on that look.'

They went into the morning room. Annabel stood at the window; her companion flitted about, catching glimpses of herself in reflecting surfaces. In five minutes the study door opened, and men's voices drew near.

Egremont met Miss Tyrrell with the manner of an old acquaintance, but unsmiling.

'I am fortunate enough to see you well again without having known of your illness,' he said.

'You didn't know that I was ill?'

Paula looked at him dubiously. He explained, and, in doing so, quite dispelled the girl's illusion that he was come on her account. When she remained silent, he said:

'You must pity the people in London.'

'Certainly I do. I'm learning to keep my temper and to talk wisely. I know nobody in London who could teach me to do either the one or the other.'

'Well, I suppose you'll go out till luncheon-time?' said Mr. Newthorpe. 'Egremont wants to have a pull. You'll excuse an old man.'

They left the house, and for an hour drank the breath of the hillsides. Paula was at first taciturn. Very unlike herself she dabbled her fingers over the boat-side, and any light remark that she made was addressed to her cousin. Annabel exerted herself to converse, chiefly telling of the excursions that had been made with Paula during the past week.

'What have you been doing in Jersey?' Paula asked of Egremont, presently. Her tone was indifferent, a little condescending.

'Reading.'

'Novels?'

'No.'

'And where are you going next?'

'I shall live in London. My travels are over, I think.'

'We have heard that too often,' said Annabel. 'Did you ever calculate how many miles you have travelled since you left Oxford?'

'I have been a restless fellow,' he admitted, regarding her with quiet scrutiny, 'but I dare say some profit has come of my wanderings. However, it's time to set to work.'

'Work!' asked Paula in surprise. 'What sort of work?'

'Local preacher's.'

Paula moved her lips discontentedly.

'That is your way of telling me to mind my own business. Don't you find the sun dreadfully hot, Annabel? Do please row into a shady place, Mr. Egremont.'

His way of handling the oars showed that he was no stranger to exercise of this kind. His frame, though a trifle meagre, was well set. By degrees a preoccupation which had been manifest in him gave way under the influence of the sky, and when it was time to approach the landing-place he had fallen into a mood of cheerful talk—light with Paula, with Annabel more earnest. His eyes often passed from one to the other of the faces opposite him, with unmarked observation; frequently he fixed his gaze on the remoter hills in brief musing.

Mr. Newthorpe had come down to the water to meet them; he had a newspaper in his hand.

'Your friend Dalmaine is eloquent on education,' he said, with a humorous twitching of the eyebrows.

'Yes, he knows his House,' Egremont replied. 'You observe the construction of his speech. After well-sounding periods on the elevation of the working classes, he casually throws out the hint that employers of labour will do wisely to increase the intelligence of their hands in view of foreign competition. Of course that is the root of the matter; but Dalmaine knows better than to begin with crude truths.'

In the meanwhile the boat was drawn up and the chain locked. The girls walked on in advance; Egremont continued to speak of Mr. Dalmaine, a rising politician, whose acquaintance he had made on the voyage home from New York.

'One of the few sincere things I ever heard from his lips was a remark he made on trade-unions. "Let them combine by all means," he said; "it's a fair fight." There you have the man; it seems to him mere common sense to regard his factory hands as his enemies. A fair fight! What a politico-economical idea of fairness!'

He spoke with scorn, his eyes flashing and his nostrils trembling. Mr. Newthorpe kept a quiet smile—sympathetic, yet critical.

Annabel sought her father for a word apart before lunch.

'How long will Mr. Egremont stay?' she asked, apparently speaking in her quality of house-mistress.

'A day or two,' was the reply. 'We'll drive over to Pooley Bridge for his bag this afternoon; he left it at the hotel.'

'What has he on his mind?' she continued, smiling.

'Some idealistic project. He has only given me a hint. I dare say we shall hear all about it to-night.'

CHAPTER II
THE IDEALIST

When Egremont began his acquaintance with the Newthorpes he was an Oxford undergraduate. A close friendship had sprung up between him and a young man named Ormonde, and at the latter's home he met Mr. Newthorpe, who, from the first, regarded him with interest. A year after Mrs. Newthorpe's death Egremont was invited to visit the house at Ullswater; since then he had twice spent a week there. This personal intercourse was slight to have resulted in so much intimacy, but he had kept up a frequent correspondence with Mr. Newthorpe from various parts of the world, and common friends aided the stability of the relation.

He was the only son of a man who had made a fortune by the manufacture of oil-cloth. His father began life as a house-painter, then became an oil merchant in a small way, and at length married a tradesman's daughter, who brought him a moderate capital just when he needed it for an enterprise promising greatly. In a short time he had established the firm of Egremont & Pollard, with extensive works in Lambeth. His wife died before him; his son received a liberal education, and in early manhood found himself, as far as he knew, without a living relative, but with ample means of independence. Young Walter Egremont retained an interest in the business, but had no intention of devoting himself to a commercial life. At the University he had made alliances with men of standing, in the academical sense, and likewise with some whose place in the world relieved them from the necessity of establishing a claim to intellect. In this way society was opened to him, and his personal qualities won for him a great measure of regard from those whom he most desired to please.

Somebody had called him 'the Idealist,' and the name adhered to him. At two-and-twenty he published a volume of poems, obviously derived from study of Shelley, but marked with a certain freshness of impersonal aspiration which was pleasant enough. They had the note of sincerity rather than the true poetical promise. The book had no successor. Having found this utterance for his fervour, Egremont began a series of ramblings over sea, in search, he said, of himself. The object seemed to evade him; he returned to England from time to time, always in appearance more restless, but always overflowing with ideas, for which he had the readiest store of enthusiastic words. He was able to talk of himself without conveying the least impression of egotism to those who were in sympathy with his intellectual point of view; he was accused of conceit only by a few who were jealous of him or were too conventional to appreciate his character. With women he was a favourite, and their society was his greatest pleasure; yet, in spite of his fervid temperament—in appearance fervid, at all events—he never seemed to fall in love. Some there were who said that the self he went so far to discover would prove to have a female form. Perhaps there was truth in this; perhaps he sought, whether consciously or no, the ideal woman. None of those with whom he companioned had a charge of light wooing to bring against him, though one or two would not have held it a misfortune if they had tempted him to forget his speculations and declare that he had reached his goal. But his striving always seemed to be for something remote from the world about him. His capacity for warm feeling, itself undeniable, was never dissociated from that impersonal zeal which was the characteristic of his expressions in verse. In fact, he had written no love-poem.

Annabel and her father observed a change in him since his last visit. This was the first time that he had come without an express invitation, and they gathered from his speech that he had at length found some definite object for his energies. His friends had for a long time been asking what he meant to do with his life. It did not appear that he purposed literary effort, though it seemed the natural outlet for his eager thought; and of the career of politics he at all times spoke with contempt. Was he one of the men, never so common as nowadays, who spend their existence in canvassing the possibilities that lie before them and delay action till they find that the will is paralysed? One did not

readily set Egremont in that class, principally, no doubt, because he was so free from the offensive forms of self-consciousness which are wont to stamp such men. The pity of it, too, if talents like his were suffered to rust unused; the very genuineness of his idealism made one believe in him and look with confidence to his future.

Having dined, all went forth to enjoy the evening upon the lawn. The men smoked; Annabel had her little table with tea and coffee. Paula had brought out a magazine, and affected to read. Annabel noticed, however, that a page was very seldom turned.

'Have you seen Mrs. Ormonde lately?' Mr. Newthorpe asked of Egremont.

'I spent a day at Eastbourne before going to Jersey.'

'She has promised to come to us in the autumn,' said Annabel; 'but she seems to have such a difficulty in leaving her Home. Had she many children about her when you were there?'

'Ten or twelve.'

'Do they all come from London?' asked Annabel.

'Yes. She has relations with sundry hospitals and the like. By-the-by, she told me one remarkable story. A short time ago out of eight children that were in the house only one could read—a little girl of ten—and this one regularly received letters from home. Now there came for her what seemed to be a small story-paper, or something of the kind, in a wrapper. Mrs. Ormonde gave it her without asking any questions, and, in the course of the morning, happening to see her reading it, she went to look what the paper was. It proved to be an anti-Christian periodical, and on the front page stood a woodcut offered as a burlesque illustration of some Biblical incident. "Father always brings it home and gives it me to read," said the child. "It makes me laugh!"'

'Probably she knew nothing of the real meaning of it all,' said Mr. Newthorpe.

'On the contrary, she understood the tendency of the paper surprisingly well; her father had explained everything to the family.'

'One of the interesting results of popular education,' remarked Mr. Newthorpe philosophically. 'It is inevitable.'

'What did Mrs. Ormonde do?' Annabel asked.

'It was a difficult point. No good would have been done by endeavouring to set the child against her father; she would be home again in a fortnight. So Mrs. Ormonde simply asked if she might have the paper when it was done with, and, having got possession, threw it into the fire with vast satisfaction. Happily it didn't come again.'

'What a gross being that father must be!' Annabel exclaimed.

'Gross enough,' Egremont replied, 'yet I shouldn't wonder if he had brains above the average in his class. A mere brute wouldn't do a thing of that kind; ten to one he honestly believed that he was benefiting the girl; educating her out of superstition.'

'But why should the poor people be left to such ugly-minded teachers?' Annabel exclaimed. 'Surely those influences may be opposed?'

'I doubt whether they can be,' said her father. 'The one insuperable difficulty lies in the fact that we have no power greater than commercial enterprise. Nowadays nothing will succeed save on the commercial basis; from church to public-house the principle applies. There is no way of spreading popular literature save on terms of supply and demand. Take the Education Act. It was devised and carried simply for the reason indicated by Egremont's friend Dalmaine; a more intelligent type of workmen is demanded that our manufacturers may keep pace with those of other countries. Well, there is a demand for comic illustrations of the Bible, and the demand is met; the paper exists because it pays. An organ of culture for the people who enjoy burlesquing the Bible couldn't possibly be made to pay.'

'But is there no one who would undertake such work without hope of recompense in money? We are not all mere tradespeople.'

'I have an idea for a beginning of such work, Miss Newthorpe,' said Egremont, in a voice rather lower than hitherto. 'I came here because I wanted to talk it over.'

Annabel met his look for a moment, expressing all the friendly interest which she felt. Mr. Newthorpe, who had been pacing on the grass, came to a seat. He placed himself next to Paula. She glanced at him, and he said kindly:

'You are quite sure you don't feel cold?'

'I dare say I'd better go in,' she replied, checking a little sigh as she closed her magazine.

'No, no, don't go, Paula!' urged her cousin, rising. 'You shall have a shawl, dear; I'll get it.'

'It is very warm,' put in Egremont. 'There surely can't be any danger in sitting till it grows dark.'

This little fuss about her soothed Paula for a while.

'Oh, I don't want to go,' she said. 'I feel I'm getting very serious and wise, listening to such talk. Now we shall hear, I suppose, what you mean by your "local preacher"?'

Annabel brought a shawl and placed it carefully about the girl's shoulders. Then she said to her father:

'Let me sit next to Paula, please.'

The change of seats was effected. Annabel secretly took one of her cousin's hands and held it. Paula seemed to regard a distant object in the garden.

There was silence for a few moments. The evening was profoundly calm. A spirit of solemn loveliness brooded upon the hills, glorious with sunset. The gnats hummed, rising and falling in myriad crowds about the motionless leaves. A spring which fell from a rock at the foot of the garden babbled poetry of the twilight.

'I hope it is something very practicable,' Annabel resumed, looking with expectancy at Egremont.

'I will have your opinion on that. I believe it to be practical enough; at all events, it is a scheme of very modest dimensions. That story of the child and her paper fixed certain thoughts that had been floating about in my mind. You know that I have long enough tried to find work, but I have been misled by the common tendency of the time. Those who want to be of social usefulness for the most part attack the lowest stratum. It seems like going to the heart of the problem, of course, and any one who has means finds there the hope of readiest result—material result. But I think that the really practical task is the most neglected, just because it does not appear so pressing. With the mud at the bottom of society we can practically do nothing; only the vast changes to be wrought by time will cleanse that foulness, by destroying the monstrous wrong which produces it. What I should like to attempt would be the spiritual education of the upper artisan and mechanic class. At present they are all but wholly in the hands of men who can do them nothing but harm—journalists, socialists, vulgar propagators of what is called freethought. These all work against culture, yet here is the field really waiting for the right tillage. I often have in mind one or two of the men at our factory in Lambeth. They are well-conducted and intelligent fellows, but, save for a vague curiosity, I should say they live without conscious aim beyond that of keeping their families in comfort. They have no religion, a matter of course; they talk incessantly of politics, knowing nothing better; but they are very far above the gross multitude. I believe such men as these have a great part to play in social development—that, in fact, *they* may become the great social reformers, working on those above them—the froth of society—no less than on those below.'

He had laid down his half-finished cigar, and, having begun in a scrupulously moderate tone, insensibly warmed to the idealist fervour. His face became more mobile, his eyes gave forth all their light, his voice was musically modulated as he proceeded in his demonstration. He addressed himself to Annabel, perhaps unconscious of doing so exclusively.

Mr. Newthorpe muttered something of assent. Paula was listening intently, but as one who hears of strange, far-off things, very difficult of realisation.

'Now suppose one took a handful of such typical men,' Egremont went on, 'and tried to inspire them with a moral ideal. At present they have nothing of the kind, but they own the instincts of decency, and that is much. I would make use of the tendency to association, which is so strong among them. They have numberless benefit clubs; they stand together resolutely to help each other in time of need and to exact terms from their employers—the fair fight, as the worthy Member for Vauxhall calls it. Well, why shouldn't they band for moral and intellectual purposes? I would have a sort of freemasonry, which had nothing to do with eating and drinking, or with the dispensing of charity; it should be wholly concerned with spiritual advancement. These men cannot become rich, and so are free from one kind of danger; they are not likely to fall into privation; they have a certain amount of leisure. If one could only stir a few of them to enthusiasm for an ideal of life! Suppose one could teach them to feel the purpose of such a book as "Sesame and Lilies," which you only moderately care for, Miss Newthorpe—'

'Not so!' Annabel broke in, involuntarily. 'I think it very beautiful and very noble.'

'What book is that?' asked Paula with curiosity.

'I'll give it to you to read, Paula,' her cousin replied.

Egremont continued:

'The work of people who labour in the abominable quarters of the town would be absurdly insignificant in comparison with what these men might do. The vulgar influence of half-taught revolutionists, social and religious, might be counteracted; an incalculable change for good might be made on the borders of the social inferno, and would spread. But it can only be done by personal influence. The man must have an ideal himself before he can create it in others. I don't know that I am strong enough for such an undertaking, but I feel the desire to try, and I mean to try. What do you think of it?'

'Thinking it so clearly must be half doing it,' said Annabel.

Egremont replied to her with a clear regard.

'But the details,' Mr. Newthorpe remarked. 'Are you going to make Lambeth your field?'

'Yes, Lambeth. I have a natural connection with the place and my name may be of some service to me there; I don't think it is of evil odour with the workmen. My project is to begin with lectures. Reserve your judgment; I have no intention of standing forth as an apostle; all I mean to do at first is to offer a free course of lectures on a period of English literature. I shall not throw open my doors to all and sundry, but specially invite a certain small number of men, whom I shall be at some pains to choose. We have at the works a foreman named Bower; I have known him, in a way, for years, and I believe he is an intelligent man. Him I shall make use of, telling him nothing of my wider aims, but simply getting him to discover for me the dozen or so of men who would be likely to care for my lectures. By-the-by, the man of whom I was speaking, the father of Mrs. Ormonde's patient, lives in Lambeth; I shall certainly make an effort to draw him into the net!'

'I shall be curious to hear more of him,' said Mr. Newthorpe. 'And you use English literature to tune the minds of your hearers?'

'That is my thought. I have spent my month in Jersey in preparing a couple of introductory lectures. It seems to me that if I can get them to understand what is meant by love of literature, pure and simple, without a thought of political or social purpose—especially without a thought of cash profit, which is so disastrously blended with what little knowledge they acquire—I shall be on the way to founding my club of social reformers. I shall be most careful not to alarm them with hints that I mean more than I say. Here arc certain interesting English books; let us see what they are about, who wrote them, and why they are deemed excellent. That is our position. These men must get on a friendly footing with me. Little by little I shall talk with them more familiarly, try to understand each one. Success depends upon my personal influence. I may find that it is inadequate, yet I have hope. Naturally, I have points of contact with the working class which are lacking to most educated

men; a little chance, and I should myself have been a mechanic or something of the kind. This may make itself felt; I believe it will.'

Night was falling. The last hue of sunset had died from the swarth hills, and in the east were pale points of starlight.

'I think you and I must go in, Paula,' said Annabel, when there had been silence for a little.

Paula rose without speaking, but as she was about to enter the house she turned back and said to Egremont:

'I get tired so soon, being so much in the open air. I'd better say good-night.'

Her uncle, when he held her hand, stroked it affectionately. He often laughed at the child's manifold follies, but her prettiness and the *naivete* which sweetened her inbred artificiality had won his liking. Much as it would have astonished Paula had she known it, his feeling was for the most part one of pity.

'I suppose you'll go out again?' Paula said to her cousin as they entered the drawing-room.

'No; I shall read a little and then go to bed.' She added, with a laugh, 'They will sit late in the study, no doubt, with their cigars and steaming glasses.'

Paula moved restlessly about the room for a few minutes; then from the door she gave a 'good-night,' and disappeared without further ceremony.

The two men came in very shortly. Egremont entered the drawing-room alone, and began to turn over books on the table. Then Annabel rose.

'It promises for another fine day to-morrow,' she said. 'I must get father away for a ramble. Do you think he looks well?'

'Better than he did last autumn, I think.'

'I must go and say good-night to him. Will you come to the study?'

He followed in silence, and Annabel took her leave of both.

The morning broke clear. It was decided to spend the greater part of the day on the hills. Paula rode; the others drove to a point whence their ramble was to begin. Annabel enjoyed walking. Very soon her being seemed to set itself to more spirited music; the veil of reflection fell from her face, and she began to talk light-heartedly.

Paula behaved with singularity. At breakfast she had been very silent, a most unusual thing, and during the day she kept an air of reserve, a sort of dignity which was amusing. Mr. Newthorpe walked beside her pony, and adapted himself to her favourite conversation, which was always of the town and Society.

Once Annabel came up with a spray of mountain saxifrage.

'Isn't it lovely, Paula?' she said. 'Do look at the petals.'

'Very nice,' was the reply, 'but it's too small to be of any use.'

There was no more talk of Egremont's projects. Books and friends and the delights of the upland scenery gave matter enough for conversation. Not long after noon the sky began to cloud, and almost as soon as the party reached home again there was beginning of rain. They spent the evening in the drawing-room. Paula was persuaded to sing, which she did prettily, though still without her native vivacity. Again she retired early.

After breakfast on the morrow it still rained, though not without promise of clearing.

'You'll excuse me till lunch,' Paula said to Annabel and Egremont, when they rose from the table. 'I have a great deal of correspondence to see to.'

'Correspondence' was a new word. Usually she said, 'I have an awful heap of letters to write.' Her dignity of the former day was still preserved.

Having dismissed her household duties, Annabel went to the morning room and sat down to her books. She was reading Virgil. For a quarter of an hour it cost her a repetition of efforts to fix her attention, but her resolve was at length successful. Then Egremont came in.

'Do I disturb you?' he said, noticing her studious attitude.

'You can give me a little help, if you will. I can't make out that line.'

She gave him one copy and herself opened another. It led to their reading some fifty lines together.

'Oh, why have we girls to get our knowledge so late and with such labour!' Annabel exclaimed at length. 'You learn Greek and Latin when you are children; it ought to be the same with us. I am impatient; I want to read straight on.'

'You very soon will,' he replied absently. Then, having glanced at the windows, which were suddenly illumined with a broad slant of sunlight, he asked: 'Will you come out? It will be delightful after the rain.'

Annabel was humming over dactylics. She put her book aside with reluctance.

'I'll go and ask my cousin.'

Egremont averted his face. Annabel went up to Paula's room, knocked, and entered. From a bustling sound within, it appeared likely that Miss Tyrrell's business-like attitude at the table had been suddenly assumed.

'Will you come out, Paula? The rain is over and gone.'

'Not now.'

'Mr. Egremont wishes to go for a walk. Couldn't you come?'

'Please beg Mr. Egremont to excuse me. I am tired after yesterday, dear.'

When her cousin had withdrawn Paula went to the window. In a few minutes she saw Egremont and Annabel go forth and stroll from the garden towards the lake. Then she reseated herself, and sat biting her pen.

The two walked lingeringly by the water's edge. They spoke of trifles. When they were some distance from the house, Egremont said:

'So you see I have at last found my work. If you thought of me at all, I dare say my life seemed to you a very useless one, and little likely to lead to anything.'

'No, I had not that thought, Mr. Egremont,' she answered simply. 'I felt sure that you were preparing yourself for something worthy.'

'I hope that is the meaning of these years that have gone so quickly. But it was not conscious preparation. It has often seemed to me that in travelling and gaining experience I was doing all that life demanded of me. Few men can be more disposed to idle dreaming than I am. And even now I keep asking myself whether this, too, is only a moment of idealism, which will go by and leave me with less practical energy than ever. Every such project undertaken and abandoned is a weight upon a man's will. If I fail in perseverance my fate will be decided.'

'I feel assured that you will not fail. You could not speak as you did last night and yet allow yourself to falter in purpose when the task was once begun. What success may await you we cannot say; the work will certainly be very difficult. Will it not ask a lifetime?'

'No less, if it is to have any lasting result.'

'Be glad, then. What happier thing can befall one than to have one's life consecrated to a worthy end!'

He walked on in silence, then regarded her.

'Such words in such a voice would make any man strong. Yet I would ask more from you. There is one thing I need to feel full confidence in myself, and that is a woman's love. I have known for a long time whose love it was that I must try to win. Can you give me what I ask?'

The smile which touched his lips so seldom was on them now. He showed no agitation, but the light of his eyes was very vivid as they read her expression. Annabel had stayed her steps; for a moment she looked troubled. His words were not unanticipated, but the answer with which she was prepared was more difficult to utter than she had thought it would be. It was the first time that a man had spoken to her thus, and though in theory such a situation had always seemed to her very simple, she could not now preserve her calm as she wished. She felt the warmth of her blood, and could not

at once command her wonted voice. But when at length she succeeded in meeting his look steadily her thought grew clear again.

'I cannot give you that, Mr. Egremont.'

As his eyes fell, she hastened to add:

'I think of you often. I feel glad to know you, and to share in your interest. But this is no more than the friendship which many people have for you—quite different from the feeling which you say would aid you. I have never known that.'

He was gazing across the lake. The melancholy always lurking in the thoughtfulness of his face had become predominant. Yet he turned to her with the smile once more.

'Those last words must be my hope. To have your friendship is much. Perhaps some day I may win more.'

'I think,' she said, with a sincerity which proved how far she was from emotion, 'that you will meet another woman whose sympathy will be far more to you than mine.'

'Then I must have slight knowledge of myself. I have known you for seven years, and, though you were a child when we first spoke to each other, I foresaw then what I tell you now. Every woman that I meet I compare with you; and if I imagine the ideal woman she has your face and your mind. I should have spoken when I was here last autumn, but I felt that I had no right to ask you to share my life as long as it remained so valueless. You see'—he smiled—'how I have grown in my own esteem. I suppose that is always the first effect of a purpose strongly conceived. Or should it be just the opposite, and have I only given you a proof that I snatch at rewards before doing the least thing to merit them?'

Something in these last sentences jarred upon her, and gave her courage to speak a thought which had often come to her in connection with Egremont.

'I think that a woman does not reason in that way if her deepest feelings are pledged. If I were able to go with you and share your life I shouldn't think I was rewarding you, but that you were offering me a great happiness. It is my loss that I can only watch you from a distance.'

The words moved him. It was not with conscious insincerity that he spoke of his love and his intellectual aims as interdependent, yet he knew that Annabel revealed the truer mind.

'And my desire is for the happiness of your love!' he exclaimed. 'Forget that pedantry—always my fault. I cannot feel sure that my other motives will keep their force, but I know that this desire will be only stronger in me as time goes on.'

Yet when she kept silence the habit of his thought again uttered itself.

'I shall pursue this work that I have undertaken, because, loving you, I dare not fall below the highest life of which I am capable. I know that you can see into my nature with those clear eyes of yours. I could not love you if I did not feel that you were far above me. I shall never be worthy of you, but I shall never cease in my striving to become so.'

The quickening of her blood, which at first troubled her, had long since subsided. She could now listen to him, and think of her reply almost with coldness. There was an unreality in the situation which made her anxious to bring the dialogue to an end.

'I have all faith in you,' she said. 'I hope—I feel assured—that something will come of your work; but it will only be so if you pursue it for its own sake.'

The simple truth of this caused him to droop his eyes again with a sense of shame. He grew impatient with himself. Had he no plain, touching words in which to express his very real love—words such as every man can summon when he pleads for this greatest boon? Yet his shame heightened the reverence in which he held her; passion of the intellect breathed in his next words.

'If you cannot love me with your heart, in your mind you can be one with me. You feel the great and the beautiful things of life. There is no littleness in your nature. In reading with you just now I saw that your delight in poetry was as spirit-deep as my own; your voice had the true music, and your cheeks warmed with sympathy. You do not deny me the right to claim so much kinship

with you. I, too, love all that is rare and noble, however in myself I fall below such ideals. Say that you admit me as something more than the friend of the everyday world! Look for once straight into my eyes and know me!'

There was no doubtful ring in this; Annabel felt the chords of her being smitten to music. She held her hand to him.

'You are my very near friend, and my life is richer for your influence.'

'I may come and see you again before very long, when I have something to tell you?'

'You know that our house always welcomes you.'

He released her hand, and they walked homewards. The sky was again overcast. A fresh gust came from the fell-side and bore with it drops of rain.

'We must hasten,' Annabel said, in a changed voice. 'Look at that magnificent cloud by the sun!'

'Isn't the rain sweet here?' she continued, anxious to re-establish the quiet, natural tone between them. 'I like the perfume and the taste of it. I remember how mournful the rain used to be in London streets.'

They regained the house. Annabel passed quickly upstairs. Egremont remained standing in the porch, looking forth upon the garden. His reverie was broken by a voice.

'How gloomy the rain is here! One doesn't mind it in London; there's always something to do and somewhere to go.'

It was Paula. Egremont could not help showing amusement.

'Do you stay much longer?' he asked.

'I don't know.'

She spoke with indifference, keeping her eyes averted.

'I must catch the mail at Penrith this evening,' he said. 'I'm afraid it will be a wet drive.'

'You're going, are you? Not to Jersey again, I hope?

'Why not?'

'It seems to make people very dull. I shall warn all my friends against it.'

She hummed an air and left him.

Late in the afternoon Egremont took leave of his friends. Mr. Newthorpe went out into the rain, and at the last moment shook hands with him heartily. Annabel stood at the window and smiled farewell.

The wheels splashed along the road; rain fell in torrents. Egremont presently looked back from the carriage window. The house was already out of view, and the summits of the circling hills were wreathed with cloud.

CHAPTER III
A CORNER OF LAMBETH

A working man, one Gilbert Grail, was spending an hour of his Saturday afternoon in Westminster Abbey. At five o'clock the sky still pulsed with heat; black shadows were sharp edged upon the yellow pavement. Between the bridges of Westminster and Lambeth the river was a colourless gleam; but in the Sanctuary evening had fallen. Above the cool twilight of the aisles floated a golden mist; and the echo of a footfall hushed itself among the tombs.

He was a man past youth, but of less than middle age, with meagre limbs and shoulders, a little bent. His clothing was rough but decent; his small and white hands gave evidence of occupation which was not rudely laborious. He had a large head, thickly covered with dark hair, which, with his moustache and beard, heightened the wanness of his complexion. A massive forehead, deep-set eyes, thin, straight nose, large lips constantly drawn inwards, made a physiognomy impressive rather than pleasing. The cast of thought was upon it; of thought eager and self-tormenting; the mark of a spirit ever straining after something unattainable. At moments when he found satisfaction in reading the legend on some monument his eyes grew placid and his beetling brows smoothed themselves; but the haunter within would not be forgotten, and, as if at a sudden recollection, he dropped his eyes in a troubled way, and moved onwards brooding. In those brief intervals of peace his countenance expressed an absorbing reverence, a profound humility. The same was evident in his bearing; he walked as softly as possible and avoided treading upon a sculptured name.

When he passed out into the sunny street, he stood for an instant with a hand veiling his eyes, as if the sudden light were too strong. Then he looked hither and thither with absent gaze, and at length bent his steps in the direction of Westminster Bridge. On the south side of the river he descended the stairs to the Albert Embankment and walked along by St. Thomas's Hospital.

Presently he overtook a man who was reading as he walked, a second book being held under his arm. It was a young workman of three- or four-and-twenty, tall, of wiry frame, square-shouldered, upright. Grail grasped his shoulder in a friendly way, asking:

'What now?'

'Well, it's tempted eighteenpence out of my pocket,' was the other's reply, as he gave the volume to be examined. 'I've wanted a book on electricity for some time.'

He spoke with a slight North of England accent. His name was Luke Ackroyd; he had come to London as a lad, and was now a work-fellow of Grail's. There was rough comeliness in his face and plenty of intelligence, something at the same time not quite satisfactory if one looked for strength of character; he smiled readily and had eyes which told of quick but unsteady thought; a mouth, too, which expressed a good deal of self-will and probably a strain of sensuality. His manner was hearty, his look frank to a fault and full of sensibility.

'I found it at the shop by Westminster Bridge,' he continued. 'You ought to go and have a look there to-night. I saw one or two things pretty cheap that I thought were in your way.'

'What's the other?' Grail inquired, returning the work on electricity, which he had glanced through without show of much interest.

'Oh, this belongs to Jo Bunce,' Ackroyd replied, laughing. 'He's just lent it me.'

It was a collection of antitheistic discourses; the titles, which were startling to the eye, sufficiently indicated the scope and quality of the matter. Grail found even less satisfaction in this than in the other volume.

'A man must have a good deal of time to spare,' he said, with a smile, 'if he spends it on stuff of that kind.'

'Oh, I don't know about that. You don't need it, but there's plenty of people that do.'

'And that's the kind of thing Bunce gives his children to read, eh?'

'Yes; he's bringing them up on it. He's made them learn a secularist's creed, and hears them say it every night.'

'Well, I'm old-fashioned in such matters,' said Grail, not caring to pursue the discussion. 'I'd a good deal rather hear children say the ordinary prayer.'

Ackroyd laughed.

'Have you heard any talk,' he asked presently, 'about lectures by a Mr. Egremont? He's a son of Bower's old governor.'

'No, what lectures?'

'Bower tells me he's a young fellow just come from Oxford or Cambridge, and he's going to give some free lectures here in Lambeth.'

'Political?'

'No. Something to do with literature.'

Ackroyd broke into another laugh—louder this time, and contemptuous.

'Sops to the dog that's beginning to show his teeth!' he exclaimed. 'It shows you what's coming. The capitalists are beginning to look about and ask what they can do to keep the people quiet. Lectures on literature! Fools! As if that wasn't just the way to remind us of what we've missed in the way of education. It's the best joke you could hit on. Let him lecture away; he'll do more than he thinks.'

'Where does he give them?' Grail inquired.

'He hasn't begun yet. Bower seems to be going round to get men to hear him. Do you think you'd like to go?'

'It depends what sort of a man he is.'

'A conceited young fool, I expect.'

Grail smiled.

In such conversation they passed the Archbishop's Palace; then, from the foot of Lambeth Bridge, turned into a district of small houses and multifarious workshops. Presently they entered Paradise Street.

The name is less descriptive than it might be. Poor dwellings, mean and cheerless, are interspersed with factories and one or two small shops; a public-house is prominent, and a railway arch breaks the perspective of the thoroughfare midway. The street at that time—in the year '80—began by the side of a graveyard, no longer used, and associated in the minds of those who dwelt around it with numberless burials in a dire season of cholera. The space has since been converted into a flower-garden, open to the children of the neighbourhood, and in summer time the bright flower-beds enhance the ignoble baldness of the by-way.

When they had nearly reached the railway arch Ackroyd stopped.

'I'm just going in to Bower's shop,' he said; 'I've got a message for poor old Boddy.'

'Boddy?'

'You know of him from the Trent girls, don't you?'

'Yes, yes,' Grail answered, nodding. He seemed about to add something, but checked himself, and, with a 'good-bye,' went his way.

Ackroyd turned his steps to a little shop close by. It was of the kind known as the 'small general'; over the door stood the name of the proprietor—'Bower'—and on the woodwork along the top of the windows was painted in characters of faded red: 'The Little Shop with the Large Heart.' Little it certainly was, and large of heart if the term could be made to signify an abundant stock. The interior was so packed with an indescribable variety of merchandise that there was scarcely space for more than two customers between door and counter. From an inner room came the sound of a violin, playing a lively air.

When the young man stepped through the doorway he was at once encompassed with the strangest blend of odours; every article in the shop—groceries of all kinds, pastry, cooked meat,

bloaters, newspapers, petty haberdashery, firewood, fruit, soap—seemed to exhale its essence distressfully under the heat; impossible that anything sold here should preserve its native savour. The air swarmed with flies, spite of the dread example of thousands that lay extinct on sheets of smeared newspaper. On the counter, among other things, was a perspiring yellow mass, retailed under the name of butter; its destiny hovered between avoirdupois and the measure of capacity. A literature of advertisements hung around; ginger-beer, blacking, blue, &c., with a certain 'Samaritan salve,' proclaimed themselves in many-coloured letters. One descried, too, a scrubby but significant little card, which bore the address of a loan office.

The music issued from the parlour behind the shop; it ceased as Ackroyd approached the counter, and at the sound of his footsteps appeared Mrs. Bower. She was a stout woman of middle age, red of face, much given to laughter, wholesomely vulgar. At four o'clock every afternoon she laid aside her sober garments of the working day and came forth in an evening costume which was the admiration and envy of Paradise Street. Popular from a certain wordy good-humour which she always had at command, she derived from this evening garb a social superiority which friends and neighbours, whether they would or no were constrained to recognise. She was deemed a well-to-do woman, and as such—Paradise Street held it axiomatic—might reasonably adorn herself for the respect of those to whom she sold miscellaneous pennyworths. She did not depend upon the business. Her husband, as we already know, was a foreman at Egremont & Pollard's oilcloth manufactory; they were known to have money laid by. You saw in her face that life had been smooth with her from the beginning. She wore a purple dress with a yellow fichu, in which was fixed a large silver brooch; on her head was a small lace cap. Her hands were enormous, and very red. As she came into the shop, she mopped her forehead with a handkerchief; perspiration streamed from every pore.

'What a man you are for keepin' yourself cool, Mr. Hackroyd!' she exclaimed; 'it's like a breath o' fresh air to look at you, I'm sure. If this kind o' weather goes on there won't be much left o' me. I'm a-goin' like the butter.'

'It's warmish, that's true,' said Luke, when she had finished her laugh. 'I heard Mr. Boddy playing in there, and I've got a message for him.'

'Come in and sit down. He's just practisin' a new piece for his club to-night.'

Ackroyd advanced into the parlour. The table was spread for tea, and at the tray sat Mrs. Bower's daughter, Mary. She was a girl of nineteen, sparely made, and rather plain-featured, yet with a thoughtful, interesting face. Her smile was brief, and always passed into an expression of melancholy, which in its turn did not last long; for the most part she seemed occupied with thoughts which lay on the borderland between reflection and anxiety. Her dress was remarkably plain, contrasting with her mother's, and her hair was arranged in the simplest way.

In a round-backed chair at a distance from the table sat an old man with a wooden leg, a fiddle on his knee. His face was parchmenty, his cheeks sunken, his lips compressed into a long, straight line; his small grey eyes had an anxious look, yet were ever ready to twinkle into a smile. He wore a suit of black, preserved from sheer decay by a needle too evidently unskilled. Wrapped about a scarcely visible collar was a broad black neckcloth of the antique fashion; his one shoe was cobbled into shapelessness. Mr. Boddy's spirit had proved more durable than his garments. Often hard set to earn the few shillings a week that sufficed to him, he kept up a long-standing reputation for joviality, and, with the aid of his fiddle, made himself welcome at many a festive gathering in Lambeth.

'Give Mr. Hackroyd a cup o' tea, Mary,' said Mrs. Bower. 'How you pore men go about your work days like this is more than I can understand. I haven't life enough in me to drive away a fly as settles on my nose. It's all very well for you to laugh, Mr. Boddy. There's good in everything, if we only see it, and you may thank the trouble you've had as it's kep' your flesh down.'

Ackroyd addressed the old man.

'There's a friend of mine in Newport Street would be glad to have you do a little job for him, Mr. Boddy. Two or three chairs, I think.'

Mr. Boddy held forth his stumpy, wrinkled hand.

'Give us a friendly grip, Mr. Ackroyd! There's never a friend in this world but the man as finds you work; that's the philosophy as has come o' my three-score-and-nine years. What's the name and address? I'll be round the first thing on Monday morning.'

The information was given.

'You just make a note o' that in your head, Mary, my dear,' the old mam continued. "'Taint very likely I'll forget, but my memory do play me a trick now and then. Ask me about things as happened fifty years ago, and I'll serve you as well as the almanac. It's the same with my eyes. I used to be near-sighted, and now I'll read you the sign-board across the street easier than that big bill on the wall.'

He raised his violin, and struck out with spirit 'The March of the Men of Harlech.'

'That's the teen as always goes with me on my way to work,' he said, with a laugh. 'It keeps up my courage; this old timber o' mine stumps time on the pavement, and I feel I'm good for something yet. If only the hand'll keep steady! Firm enough yet, eh, Mr. Ackroyd?'

He swept the bow through a few ringing chords.

'Firm enough,' said Luke, 'and a fine tone, too. I suppose the older the fiddle is the better it gets?'

'Ah, 'taint like these fingers. Old Jo Racket played this instrument more than sixty years ago; so far back I can answer for it. You remember Jo, Mrs. Bower, ma'am? Yes, yes, you can just remember him; you was a little 'un when he'd use to crawl round from the work'us of a Sunday to the "Green Man." When he went into the 'Ouse he give the fiddle to Mat Trent, Lyddy and Thyrza's father, Mr. Ackroyd. Ah, talk of a player! You should a' heard what Mat could do with this 'ere instrument. What do *you* say, Mrs. Bower, ma'am?'

'He was a good player, was Mr. Trent; but not better than somebody else we know of, eh, Mr. Hackroyd?'

'Now don't you go pervertin' my judgment with flattery, ma'am,' said the old man, looking pleased for all that. 'Matthew Trent was Matthew Trent, an' Lambeth 'll never know another like him. He was made o' music! When did you hear any man with a tenor voice like his? He made songs, too, Mr. Ackroyd—words, music, an' all. Why, Thyrza sings one of 'em still.'

'But how does she remember it?' Ackroyd asked with much interest. 'He died when she was a baby.'

'Yes, yes, she don't remember it of her father. It was me as taught her it, to be sure, as I did most o' the other songs she knows.'

'But she wasn't a baby either,' put in Mrs. Bower. 'She was four years; an' Lydia was four years older.'

'Four years an' two months,' said Mr. Boddy, nodding with a laugh. 'Let's be ac'rate, Mrs. Bower, ma'am. Thirteen year ago next fourteenth o' December, Mr. Ackroyd. There's a deal happened since then. On that day I had my shop in the Cut, and I had two legs like other mortals. Things wasn't doing so bad with me. Why, it's like yesterday to remember. My wife she come a-runnin' into the shop just before dinner-time. "There's a boiler busted at Walton's," she says, "an' they say as Mr. Trent's killed." It was Walton's, the pump-maker's, in Ground Street.'

'It's Simpson & Thomas's now,' remarked Mrs. Bower. 'Why, where Jim Candle works, you know, Mr. Hackroyd.'

Luke nodded, knowing the circumstance. The whole story was familiar to him, indeed; but Mr. Boddy talked on in an old man's way for pleasure in the past.

'So it is, so it is. Me an' my wife took the little 'uns to the 'Orspital. He knew 'em, did poor Mat, but he couldn't speak. What a face he had! Thyrza was frighted and cried; Lyddy just held on hard to my hand, but she didn't cry. I don't remember to a' seen Lyddy cry more than two or three times in my life; she always hid away for that, when she couldn't help herself, bless her!'

'Lydia grows more an' more like her father,' said Mrs. Bower.

'She does, ma'am, she does. I used to say as she was like him, when she sat in my shop of a night and watched the people in and out. Her eyes was so bright-looking, just like Mat's. Eh, there wasn't much as the little 'un didn't see. One day—how my wife did laugh!—she looks at me for a long time, an' then she says: "How is it, Mr. Boddy," she says, "as you've got one eyelid lower than the other?" It's true as I have a bit of a droop in the right eye, but it's not so much as any one 'ud notice it at once. I can hear her say that as if it was in this room. An' she stood before me, a little thing that high. I didn't think she'd be so tall. She growed wonderful from twelve to sixteen. It's me has to look up to her now.'

A customer entered the shop, and Mrs. Bower went out.

'I don't think Thyrza's as much a favourite with any one as her sister,' said Ackroyd, looking at Mary Bower, who had been silent all this time.

'Oh, I like her very much,' was the reply. 'But there's something—I don't think she's as easy to understand as Lydia. Still, I shouldn't wonder if she pleases some people more.'

Mary dropped her eyes as she spoke, and smiled gently. Ackroyd tapped with his foot.

'That's Totty Nancarrow,' said Mrs. Bower, reappearing from the shop. 'What a girl that is, to be sure! She's for all the world like a lad put into petticoats. I should think there's a-goin' to be a feast over in Newport Street. A tin o' sardines, four bottles o' ginger-beer, two pound o' seed cake, an' two pots o' raspberry! Eh, she's a queer 'un! I can't think where she gets her money from either.'

'It's a pity to see Thyrza going about with her so much,' said Mary, gravely.

'Why, I can't say as I know any real harm of her,' said her mother, 'unless it is as she's a Catholic.'

'Totty Nancarrow a Catholic!' exclaimed Ackroyd. 'Why, I never knew that.'

'Her mother was Irish, you see, an' I don't suppose as her father thought much about religion. I dessay there's some good people Catholics, but I can't say as I take much to them I know.'

Mary's face was expressing lively feeling.

'How can they be really good, mother, when their religion lets them do wrong, if only they'll go and confess it to the priest? I wouldn't trust anybody as was a Catholic. I don't think the religion ought to be allowed.'

Here was evidently a subject which had power to draw Mary from her wonted reticence. Her quiet eyes gleamed all at once with indignation.

Ackroyd laughed with good-natured ridicule.

'Nay,' he said, 'the time's gone by for that kind of thing, Miss Bower. You wouldn't have us begin religious persecution again?'

'I don't want to persecute anybody,' the girl answered; 'but I wouldn't let them be misled by a bad and false religion.'

On any other subject Mary would have expressed her opinion with diffidence; not on this.

'I don't want to be rude, Miss Mary,' Luke rejoined, 'but what right have you to say that their religion's any worse or falser than your own?'

'Everybody knows that it is—that cares about religion at all,' Mary replied with coldness and, in the last words, a significant severity.

'It's the faith, Mary, my dear,' interposed Mr. Boddy, 'the faith's the great thing. I don't suppose as form matters so much.'

The girl gave the old man a brief, offended glance, and drew into herself.

'Well,' said Mrs. Bower, 'that's one way o' lookin' at it but I can't see neither as there's much good in believin' what isn't true.'

'That's to the point, Mrs. Bower,' said Ackroyd with a smile.

There was a footstep in the shop—firm, yet light and quick—then a girl's face showed itself at the parlour door. It was a face which atoned for lack of regular features by the bright intelligence and the warmth of heart that shone in its smile of greeting. A fair broad forehead lay above well-arched brows; the eyes below were large and shrewdly observant, with laughter and kindness blent

in their dark depths. The cheeks were warm with health; the lips and chin were strong, yet marked with refinement; they told of independence, of fervid instincts; perhaps of a temper a little apt to be impatient. It was not an imaginative countenance, yet alive with thought and feeling—all, one felt, ready at the moment's need—the kind of face which becomes the light and joy of home, the bliss of children, the unfailing support of a man's courage. Her hair was cut short and crisped itself above her neck; her hat of black straw and dark dress were those of a work-girl—poor, yet, in their lack of adornment, suiting well with the active, helpful impression which her look produced.

'Here's Mary an' Mr. Hackroyd fallin' out again, Lydia,' said Mrs. Bower.

'What about now?' Lydia asked, coming in and seating herself. Her eyes passed quickly over Ackroyd's face and rested on that of the old man with much kindness.

'Oh, the hold talk—about religion.'

'I think it 'ud be better if they left that alone,' she replied, glancing at Mary.

'You're right, Miss Trent,' said Luke. 'It's about the most unprofitable thing anyone can argue about.'

'Have you had your tea?' Mrs. Bower asked of Lydia.

'No; but I mustn't stop to have any, thank you, Mrs. Bower. Thyrza 'll think I'm never coming home. I only looked in just to ask Mary to come and have tea with us tomorrow.'

Ackroyd rose to depart.

'If I see Holmes I'll tell him you'll look in on Monday, Mr. Boddy.'

'Thank you, Mr. Ackroyd, thank you; no fear but I'll be there, sir.'

He nodded a leave-taking and went.

'Some work, grandad?' Lydia asked, moving to sit by Mr. Boddy.

'Yes, my dear; the thing as keeps the world a-goin'. How's the little 'un?'

'Why, I don't think she seems very well. I didn't want her to go to work this morning, but she couldn't make up her mind to stay at home. The hot weather makes her restless.'

'It's dreadful tryin'!' sighed Mrs. Bower.

'But I really mustn't stay, and that's the truth.' She rose from her chair. 'Where do you think I've been, Mary? Mrs. Isaacs sent round this morning to ask if I could give her a bit of help. She's going to Margate on Monday, and there we've been all the afternoon trimming new hats for herself and the girls. She's given me a shilling, and I'm sure it wasn't worth half that, all I did. You'll come tomorrow, Mary?'

'I will if—you know what?'

'Now did you ever know such a girl!' Lydia exclaimed, looking round at the others. 'You understand what she means, Mrs. Bower?'

'I dare say I do, my dear.'

'But I can't promise, Mary. I don't like to leave Thyrza always.'

'I don't see why she shouldn't come too,' said Mary. Lydia shook her head.

'Well, you come at four o'clock, at all events, and we'll see all about it. Good-bye, grandad.'

She hurried away, throwing back a bright look as she passed into the shop.

Paradise Street runs at right angles into Lambeth Walk. As Lydia approached this point, she saw that Ackroyd stood there, apparently waiting for her. He was turning over the leaves of one of his books, but kept glancing towards her as she drew near. He wished to speak, and she stopped.

'Do you think,' he said, with diffidence, 'that your sister would come out to-morrow after tea?'

Lydia kept her eyes down.

'I don't know, Mr. Ackroyd,' she answered. 'I'll ask her; I don t think she's going anywhere.'

'It won't be like last Sunday?'

'She really didn't feel well. And I can't promise, you know Mr. Ackroyd.'

She met his eyes for an instant, then looked along the street There was a faint smile on her lips, with just a suspicion of some trouble.

'But you *will* ask her?'

'Yes, I will.'

She added in a lower voice, and with constraint:

'I'm afraid she won't go by herself.'

'Then come with her. Do! Will you?'

'If she asks me to, I will.'

Lydia moved as if to leave him, but he followed.

'Miss Trent, you'll say a word for me sometimes?'

She raised her eyes again and replied quickly:

'I never say nothing against you, Mr. Ackroyd.'

'Thank you. Then I'll be at the end of the Walk at six o'clock, shall I?'

She nodded, and walked quickly on. Ackroyd turned back into Paradise Street. His cheeks were a trifle flushed, and he kept making nervous movements with his head. So busy were his thoughts that he unconsciously passed the door of the house in which he lived, and had to turn when the roar of a train passing over the archway reminded him where he was.

CHAPTER IV
THYRZA SINGS

Lydis, too, betrayed some disturbance of thought as she pursued her way. Her face was graver than before: once or twice her lips moved as if she were speaking to herself.

After going a short distance along Lambeth Walk, she turned off into a street which began unpromisingly between low-built and poverty-stained houses, but soon bettered in appearance. Its name is Walnut Tree Walk. For the most part it consists of old dwellings, which probably were the houses of people above the working class in days when Lambeth's squalor was confined within narrower limits. The doors are framed with dark wood, and have hanging porches. At the end of the street is a glimpse of trees growing in Kennington Road.

To one of these houses Lydia admitted herself with a latch-key; she ascended to the top floor and entered a room in the front. It was sparely furnished, but with a certain cleanly comfort. A bed stood in one corner; in another, a small washhand-stand; between them a low chest of drawers with a looking-glass upon it. The rest was arranged for day use; a cupboard kept out of sight household utensils and food. Being immediately under the roof, the room was much heated after long hours of sunshine. From the open window came a heavy scent of mignonette.

Thyrza had laid the table for tea, and was sitting idly. It was not easy to recognise her as Lydia's sister; if you searched her features the sisterhood was there, but the type of countenance was so subtly modified, so refined, as to become beauty of rare suggestiveness. She was of pale complexion, and had golden hair; it was plaited in one braid, which fell to her waist. Like Lydia's, her eyes were large and full of light; every line of the face was delicate, harmonious, sweet; each thought that passed through her mind reflected itself in a change of expression, produced one knew not how, one phase melting into another like flitting lights upon a stream in woodland. It was a subtly morbid physiognomy, and impressed one with a sense of vague trouble. There was none of the spontaneous pleasure in life which gave Lydia's face such wholesome brightness; no impulse of activity, no resolve; all tended to preoccupation, to emotional reverie. She had not yet completed her seventeenth year, and there was still something of childhood in her movements. Her form was slight, graceful, and of lower stature than her sister's. She wore a dress of small-patterned print, with a broad collar of cheap lace.

'It was too hot to light a fire,' she said, rising as Lydia entered. 'Mrs. Jarmey says she'll give us water for the tea.'

'I hoped you'd be having yours,' Lydia replied. 'It's nearly six o'clock. I'll take the tea-pot down, dear.'

When they were seated at the table, Lydia drew from her pocket a shilling and held it up laughingly.

'That from Mrs. Isaacs?' her sister asked.

'Yes. Not bad for Saturday afternoon, is it? Now I must take my boots to be done. If it began to rain I should be in a nice fix; I haven't a sole to walk on.'

'I just looked in at Mrs. Bower's as I passed,' she continued presently. 'Mr. Ackroyd was there. He'd come to tell grandad of some work. That was kind of him, wasn't it?'

Thyrza assented absently.

'Is Mary coming to tea to-morrow?' she asked.

'Yes. At least she said she would if I'd go to chapel with her afterwards. She won't be satisfied till she gets me there every Sunday.'

'How tiresome, Lyddy!'

'But there's somebody wants you to go out as well. You know who.'

'You mean Mr. Ackroyd?'

'Yes. He met me when I came out of Mrs. Bower's, and asked me if I thought you would.'

Thyrza was silent for a little, then she said:

'I can't go with him alone, Lyddy. I don't mind if you go too.'

'But that's just what he doesn't want,' said her sister, with a smile which was not quite natural.

Thyrza averted her eyes, and began to speak of something else. The meal was quickly over, then Lydia took up some sewing. Thyrza went to the window and stood for a while looking at the people that passed, but presently she seated herself, and fell into the brooding which her sister's entrance had interrupted. Lydia also was quieter than usual; her eyes often wandered from her work to Thyrza. At last she leaned forward and said:

'What are you thinking of, Blue-eyes?'

Thyrza drew a deep sigh.

'I don't know, Lyddy. It's so hot, I don't feel able to do anything.'

'But you're always thinking and thinking. What is it that troubles you?'

'I feel dull.'

'Why don't you like to go out with Mr. Ackroyd?' Lydia asked.

'Why do you so much want me to, Lyddy?'

'Because he thinks a great deal of you, and it would be nice if you got to like him.'

'But I shan't, never;—I know I shan't.'

'Why not, dear?'

'I don't *dislike* him, but he mustn't get to think it's any thing else. I'll go out with him if you'll go as well,' she added, fixing her eyes on Lydia's.

The latter bent to pick up a reel of cotton.

'We'll see when to-morrow comes,' she said.

Silence again fell between them, whilst Lydia's fingers worked rapidly. The evening drew on. Thyrza took her chair to the window, leaned upon the sill, and looked up at the reddening sky. The windows of the other houses were all open; here and there women talked from them with friends across the street. People were going backwards and forwards with bags and baskets, on the business of Saturday evening; in the distance sounded the noise of the market in Lambeth Walk.

Shortly after eight o'clock Lydia said

'I'll just go round with my boots, and get something for dinner to-morrow.'

'I'll come with you,' Thyrza said. 'I can't bear to sit here any longer.'

They went forth, and were soon in the midst of the market. Lambeth Walk is a long, narrow street, and at this hour was so thronged with people that an occasional vehicle with difficulty made slow passage. On the outer edges of the pavement, in front of the busy shops, were rows of booths, stalls, and harrows, whereon meat, vegetables, fish, and household requirements of indescribable variety were exposed for sale. The vendors vied with one another in uproarious advertisement of their goods. In vociferation the butchers doubtless excelled; their 'Lovely, lovely, lovely!' and their reiterated 'Buy, buy, buy!' rang clangorous above the hoarse roaring of costermongers and the din of those who clattered pots and pans. Here and there meat was being sold by Dutch auction, a brisk business. Umbrellas, articles of clothing, quack medicines, were disposed of in the same way, giving occasion for much coarse humour. The market-night is the sole out-of-door amusement regularly at hand for London working people, the only one, in truth, for which they show any real capacity. Everywhere was laughter and interchange of good-fellowship. Women sauntered the length of the street and back again for the pleasure of picking out the best and cheapest bundle of rhubarb, or lettuce, the biggest and hardest cabbage, the most appetising rasher; they compared notes, and bantered each other on purchases. The hot air reeked with odours. From stalls where whelks were sold rose the pungency of vinegar; decaying vegetables trodden under foot blended their putridness with the musty smell of second-hand garments; the grocers' shops were aromatic; above all was distinguishable the acrid exhalation from the shops where fried fish and potatoes hissed in boiling

grease. There Lambeth's supper was preparing, to be eaten on the spot, or taken away wrapped in newspaper. Stewed eels and baked meat pies were discoverable through the steam of other windows, but the fried fish and potatoes appealed irresistibly to the palate through the nostrils, and stood first in popularity.

The people were of the very various classes which subdivide the great proletarian order. Children of the gutter and sexless haunters of the street corner elbowed comfortable artisans and their wives; there were bareheaded hoidens from the obscurest courts, and work-girls whose self-respect was proof against all the squalor and vileness hourly surrounding them. Of the women, whatsoever their appearance, the great majority carried babies. Wives, themselves scarcely past childhood, balanced shawl-enveloped bantlings against heavy market-baskets. Little girls of nine or ten were going from stall to stall, making purchases with the confidence and acumen of old housekeepers; slight fear that they would fail to get their money's worth. Children, too, had the business of sale upon their hands: ragged urchins went about with blocks of salt, importuning the marketers, and dishevelled girls carried bundles of assorted vegetables, crying, 'A penny all the lot! A penny the 'ole lot!'

The public-houses were full. Through the gaping doors you saw a tightly-packed crowd of men, women, and children, drinking at the bar or waiting to have their jugs filled, tobacco smoke wreathing above their heads. With few exceptions the frequenters of the Walk turned into the public-house as a natural incident of the evening's business. The women with the babies grew thirsty in the hot, foul air of the street, and invited each other to refreshment of varying strength, chatting the while of their most intimate affairs, the eternal 'says I,' 'says he,' 'says she,' of vulgar converse. They stood indifferently by the side of liquor-sodden creatures whose look was pollution. Companies of girls, neatly dressed and as far from depravity as possible, called for their glasses of small beer, and came forth again with merriment in treble key.

When the sisters had done their business at the boot-maker's, and were considering what their purchase should be for Sunday's dinner, Thyrza caught sight of Totty Nancarrow entering a shop. At once she said: 'I won't be late back, Lyddy. I'm just going to walk a little way with Totty.'

Lydia's face showed annoyance.

'Where is she?' she asked, looking back.

'In the butcher's just there.'

'Don't go to-night, Thyrza. I'd rather you didn't.'

'I promise I won't be late. Only half an hour.'

She waved her hand and ran off, of a sudden changed to cheerfulness. Totty received her in the shop with a friendly laugh. Mrs. Bower's description of Miss Nancarrow as a lad in petticoats was not inapt, yet she was by no means heavy or awkward. She had a lithe, shapely figure, and her features much resembled those of a fairly good-looking boy. Her attire showed little care for personal adornment, but it suited her, because it suggested bodily activity. She wore a plain, tight-fitting grey gown, a small straw hat of the brimless kind, and a white linen collar about her neck. Totty was nineteen; no girl in Lambeth relished life with so much determination, yet to all appearance so harmlessly. Her independence was complete; for five years she had been parentless and had lived alone.

Thyrza was attracted to her by this air of freedom and joyousness which distinguished Totty. It was a character wholly unlike her own, and her imaginative thought discerned in it something of an ideal; her own timidity and her tendency to languor found a refreshing antidote in the other's breezy carelessness. Impurity of mind would have repelled her, and there was no trace of it in Totty. Yet Lydia took very ill this recently-grown companionship, holding her friend Mary Bower's view of the girl's character. Her prejudice was enhanced by the jealous care with which, from the time of her own childhood, she had been accustomed to watch over her sister. Already there had been trouble between Thyrza and her on this account. In spite of the unalterable love which united them,

their points of unlikeness not seldom brought about debates which Lydia's quick temper sometimes aggravated to a quarrel.

So Lydia finished her marketing and turned homewards with a perturbed mind. But the other two walked, with gossip and laughter, to Totty's lodgings, which were in Newport Street, an offshoot of Paradise Street.

'I'm going with Annie West to a friendly lead,' Totty said; 'will you come with us?'

Thyrza hesitated. The entertainment known as a 'friendly lead' is always held at a public-house, and she knew that Lydia would seriously disapprove of her going to such a place. Yet she had even a physical need of change, of recreation. Whilst she discussed the matter anxiously with herself they entered the house and went up to Totty's room. The house was very small, and had a close, musty smell, as if no fresh air ever got into it. Totty's chamber was a poor, bare little retreat, with low, cracked, grimy ceiling, and one scrap of carpet on the floor, just by the diminutive bed. On a table lay the provisions she had that afternoon brought in from Mrs. Bower's. On the mantel-piece was a small card, whereon was printed an announcement of the friendly lead; at the bead stood the name of a public-house, with that of its proprietor; then followed: 'A meeting will take place at the above on Saturday evening, August 2, for the benefit of Bill Mennie, the well-known barber of George Street, who has been laid up through breaking of his leg, and is quite unable to follow his employment at present. We the undersigned, knowing him to be thoroughly respected and a good supporter of these meetings, they trust you will come forward on this occasion, and give him that support he so richly deserve, this being his first appeal.—Chairman:—Count Bismark. Vice:—Dick Perkins. Assisted by' (here was a long list, mostly of nicknames) 'Little Arthur, Flash Bob, Young Brummy, Lardy, Bumper, Old Tacks, Jo at Thomson's, Short-pipe Tommy, Boy Dick, Chaffy Sam Coppock,' and others equally suggestive.

Whilst Thyrza perused this, Totty was singing a merry song.

'I've had ten shillin's sent me to-day,' she said.

'Who by?'

'An old uncle of mine, 'cause it's my birthday to-morrow. He's a rum old fellow. About two years ago he came and asked me if I'd go and live with him and my aunt, and be made a lady of. Honest, he did! He keeps a shop in Tottenham Court Road. He and father 'd quarrelled, and he never come near when father died, and I had to look out for myself. Now, he'd like to make a lady of me; he'll wait a long time till he gets the chance!'

'But wouldn't it be nice, Totty?' Thyrza asked, doubtfully.

'I'd sooner live in my own way, thank you. Fancy me havin' to sit proper at a table, afraid to eat an' drink! What's the use o' livin', if you don't enjoy yourself?'

They were interrupted by a knock at the door, followed by the appearance of Annie West, a less wholesome-looking girl than Totty, but equally vivacious.

'Well, will you come to the "Prince Albert," Thyrza?' Totty asked.

'I can't stay long,' was the answer; 'but I'll go for a little while.'

The house of entertainment was at no great distance. They passed through the bar and up into a room on the first floor, where a miscellaneous assembly was just gathering. Down the middle was a long table, with benches beside it, and a round-backed chair at each end; other seats were ranged along the walls. At the upper end of the room an arrangement of dirty red hangings—in the form of a canopy, surmounted by a lion and unicorn, of pasteboard—showed that festive meetings were regularly held here. Round about were pictures of hunting incidents, of racehorses, of politicians and pugilists, interspersed with advertisements of beverages. A piano occupied one corner.

The chairman was already in his place; on the table before him was a soup-plate, into which each visitor threw a contribution on arriving. Seated on the benches were a number of men, women, and girls, all with pewters or glasses before them, and the air was thickening with smoke of pipes. The beneficiary of the evening, a portly person with a face of high satisfaction, sat near the chairman, and

by him were two girls of decent appearance, his daughters. The president puffed at a churchwarden and exchanged genial banter with those who came up to deposit offerings. Mr. Dick Perkins, the Vice, was encouraging a spirit of conviviality at the other end. A few minutes after Thyrza and her companions had entered, a youth of the seediest appearance struck introductory chords on the piano, and started off at high pressure with a selection of popular melodies. The room by degrees grew full. Then the chairman rose, and with jocular remarks announced the first song.

Totty had several acquaintances present, male and female; her laughter frequently sounded above the hubbub of voices. Thyrza, who had declined to have anything to drink, shrank into as little space as possible; she was nervous and self-reproachful, yet the singing and the uproar gave her a certain pleasure. There was nothing in the talk around her and the songs that were sung that made it a shame for her to be present. Plebeian good-humour does not often degenerate into brutality at meetings of this kind until a late hour of the evening. The girls who sat with glasses of beer before them, and carried on primitive flirtations with their neighbours, were honest wage-earners of factory and workshop, well able to make themselves respected. If they lacked refinement, natural or acquired, it was not their fault; toil was behind them and before, the hours of rest were few, suffering and lack of bread might at any moment come upon them. They had all thrown their hard-earned pence into the soup-plate gladly and kindly; now they enjoyed themselves.

The chairman excited enthusiasm by announcement of a song by Mr. Sam Coppock—known to the company as 'Chaffy Sem.' Sam was a young man who clearly had no small opinion of himself; he wore a bright-blue necktie, and had a geranium flower in his button-hole; his hair was cut as short as scissors could make it, and as he stood regarding the assembly he twisted the ends of a scarcely visible moustache. When he fixed a round glass in one eye and perked his head with a burlesque of aristocratic bearing, the laughter and applause were deafening.

'He's a warm 'un, is Sem!' was the delighted comment on all hands.

The pianist made discursive prelude, then Mr. Coppock gave forth a ditty of the most sentimental character, telling of the disappearance of a young lady to whom he was devoted. The burden, in which all bore a part, ran thus:

We trecked 'er little footprints in the snayoo,
We trecked 'er little footprints in the snayoo,
I shall ne'er forget the d'y
When Jenny lost her w'y,
And we trecked 'er little footprints in the snayoo!

It was known that the singer had thoughts of cultivating his talent and of appearing on the music-hall stage; it was not unlikely that he might some day become 'the great Sam.' A second song was called for and granted; a third—but Mr. Coppock intimated that it did not become him to keep other talent in the background. The chairman made a humorous speech, informing the company that their friend would stand forth again later in the evening. Mr. Dick Perkins was at present about to oblige.

The Vice was a frisky little man. He began with what is known as 'patter,' then gave melodious account of a romantic meeting with a damsel whom he had seen only once to lose sight of for ever. And the refrain was:

She wore a lov-e-lie bonnet
With fruit end flowers upon it,
End she dwelt in the henvirons of 'Ol-lo-w'y!

As yet only men had sung; solicitation had failed with such of the girls as were known to be musically given. Yet an earnest prayer from the chairman succeeded at length in overcoming the

diffidence of one. She was a pale, unhealthy thing, and wore an ugly-shaped hat with a gruesome green feather; she sang with her eyes down, and in a voice which did not lack a certain sweetness. The ballad was of springtime and the country and love.

Underneath the May-tree blossoms
Oft we've wandered, you and I,
Listening to the mill-stream's whisper,
Like a stream soft-gliding by.

The girl had a drunken mother, and spent a month or two of every year in the hospital, for her day's work overtaxed her strength. She was one of those fated toilers, to struggle on as long as any one would employ her, then to fall among the forgotten wretched. And she sang of May-bloom and love; of love that had never come near her and that she would never know; sang, with her eyes upon the beer-stained table, in a public-house amid the backways of Lambeth.

Totty Nancarrow was whispering to Thyrza:

'Sing something, old girl! Why shouldn't you?'

Annie West was also at hand, urging the same.

'Let 'em hear some real singing, Thyrza. There's a dear.'

Thyrza was in sore trouble. Music, if it were but a street organ, always stirred her heart and made her eager for the joy of song. She had never known what it was to sing before a number of people; the prospect of applause tempted her. Yet she had scarcely the courage, and the thought of Lydia's grief and anger—for Lydia would surely hear of it—was keenly present.

'It's getting late,' she replied nervously. 'I can't stay; I can't sing to-night.'

Only one or two people in the room knew her by sight, but Totty had led to its being passed from one to another that she was a good singer. The landlord of the house happened to be in the room; he came and spoke to her.

'You don't remember me, Miss Trent, but I knew your father well enough, and I knew you when you was a little 'un. In those days I had the "Green Man" in the Cut; your father often enough gave us a toon on his fiddle. A rare good fiddler he was, too! Give us a song now, for old times' sake.'

Thyrza found herself preparing, in spite of herself. She trembled violently, and her heart beat with a strange pain. She heard the chairman shout her name; the sound made her face burn.

'Oh, what shall I sing?' she whispered distractedly to Totty, whilst all eyes were turned to regard her.

'Sing "A Penny for your thoughts."'

It was the one song she knew of her father's making, a half-mirthful, half-pathetic little piece in the form of a dialogue between husband and wife, a true expression of the life of working folk, which only a man who was more than half a poet could have shaped.

The seedy youth at the piano was equal to any demand for accompaniment; Totty hummed the air to him, and he had his chords ready without delay.

Thyrza raised her face and began to sing. Yes, it was different enough from anything that had come before; her pure sweet tones touched the hearers profoundly; not a foot stirred. At the second verse she had grown in confidence, and rose more boldly to the upper notes. At the end she was singing her best—better than she had ever sung at home, better than she thought she could sing. The applause that followed was tumultuous. By this time much beer had been consumed; the audience was in a mood for enjoying good things.

'That's something like, old girl!' cried Totty, clapping her on the back. 'Have a drink out of my glass. It's only ginger-beer; it can't hurt you. This is jolly! Ain't it a lark to be alive?'

The pale-faced girl who had sung of May-blossoms looked across the table with eyes in which jealousy strove against admiration. There were remarks aside between the men with regard to Thyrza's personal appearance.

She must sing again. They were not going to be left with hungry ears after a song like that. Thyrza still suffered from the sense that she was doing wrong, but the praise was so sweet to her; sweeter, she thought, than anything she had ever known. She longed to repeat her triumph.

Totty named another song; the faint resistance was overcome, and again the room hushed itself, every hearer spellbound. It was a voice well worthy of cultivation, excellent in compass, with rare sweet power. Again the rapturous applause, and again the demand for more. Another! she should not refuse them. Only one more and they would be content. And a third time she sang; a third time was borne upwards on clamour.

'Totty, I *must* go,' she whispered. 'What's the time?'

'It's only just after ten,' was the reply. 'You'll soon run home.'

'After ten? Oh, I must go at once!'

She left her place, and as quickly as possible made her way through the crowd. Just at the door she saw a face that she recognised, but a feeling of faintness was creeping upon her, and she could think of nothing but the desire to breathe fresh air. Already she was on the stairs, but her strength suddenly failed; she felt herself falling, felt herself strongly seized, then lost consciousness.

She came to herself in a few minutes in the bar-parlour; the landlady was attending to her, and the door had been shut against intruders. Her first recognition was of Luke Ackroyd.

'Don't say anything,' she murmured, looking at him imploringly. 'Don't tell Lyddy.'

'Not I,' replied Ackroyd. 'Just drink a drop and you'll be all right. I'll see you home. You feel better, don't you?'

Yes, she felt better, though her head ached miserably. Soon she was able to walk, and longed to hasten away. The landlady let her out by the private door, and Ackroyd went with her.

'Will you take my arm?' he said, speaking very gently, and looking into her face with eloquent eyes. 'I'm rare and glad I happened to be there. I heard you singing from downstairs, and I asked, Who in the world's that? I know now what Mr. Boddy means when he talks so about your voice. Won't you take my arm, Miss Trent?'

'I feel quite well again, thank you,' she replied. 'I'd no business to be there, Mr. Ackroyd. Lyddy 'll be very angry; she can't help hearing.'

'No, no! she won't be angry. You tell her at once. You were with Totty Nancarrow, I suppose? Oh, it'll be all right. But of course it isn't the kind of place for you, Miss Trent.'

She kept silence. They were walking through a quiet street where the only light came from the gas-lamps. Ackroyd presently looked again into her face.

'Will you come out to-morrow?' he asked, softly.

'Not to-morrow, Mr. Ackroyd.' She added: 'If I did I couldn't come alone. It is better to tell you at once, isn't it? I don't mind with my sister, because then we just go like friends; but I don't want to have people think anything else.'

'Then come with your sister. We *are* friends, aren't we? I can wait for something else.'

'But you mustn't, Mr. Ackroyd. It'll never come. I mean it; I shall never alter my mind. I have a reason.'

'What reason?' he asked, standing still.

She looked away.

'I mean that—that I couldn't never marry you.'

'Don't say that! You don't knew what I felt when I heard you singing. Have you heard any harm against me. Thyrza? I haven't always been as steady a fellow as I ought to be, but that was before I came to know you. It's no good, whatever you say—I can't give up hope. Why, a man 'ud do anything for half a kind word from you. Thyrza (he lowered his voice), there isn't anyone else, is there?'

She was silent.

'You don't mean that? Good God! I don't know what'll become of me if I think of that. The only thing I care to live for is the hope of having you for my wife.'

'But you mustn't hope, Mr. Ackroyd. You'll find someone much better for you than me. But I can't stop. It's so late, and my head aches so. Do let me go, please.'

He made an effort over himself. The nearest lamp showed him that she was very pale.

'Only one word, Thyrza. Is there really any one else?'

'No; but that doesn't alter it.'

She walked quickly on. Ackroyd, with a great sigh of relief, went on by her side. They came out into Lambeth Walk, where the market was as noisy as ever; the shops lit up, the stalls flaring with naphtha lamps, the odour of fried fish everywhere predominant. He led her through the crowd and a short distance into her own street. Then she gave him her hand and said: 'Good-night, Mr. Ackroyd. Thank you for bringing me back. You'll be friends with me and Lyddy?'

'You'll come out with her to-morrow?'

'I can't promise. Good-night!'

CHAPTER V
A LAND OF TWILIGHT

It happened that Mrs. Jarmey, the landlady of the house in which the sisters lived, had business in the neighbourhood of the 'Prince Albert,' and chanced to exchange a word with an acquaintance who had just come away after hearing Thyrza sing. Returning home, she found Lydia at the door, anxiously and impatiently waiting for Thyrza's appearance. The news, of course, was at once communicated, with moral reflections, wherein Mrs. Jarmey excelled. Not five minutes later, and whilst the two were still talking in the passage, the front door opened, and Thyrza came in. Lydia turned and went upstairs.

Thyrza, entering the room, sought her sister's face; it had an angry look. For a moment Lydia did not speak; the other, laying aside her hat, said: 'I'm sorry I'm so late, Lyddy.'

'Where have you been?' her sister asked, in a voice which strove to command itself.

Thyrza could not tell the whole truth at once, though she knew it would have to be confessed eventually; indeed, whether or no discovery came from other sources, all would eventually be told of her own free will. She might fear at the moment, but in the end kept no secret from Lydia.

'I've been about with Totty,' she said, averting her face as she drew off her cotton gloves.

'Yes, you have! You've been singing at a public-house.'

Lydia was too upset to note the paleness of Thyrza's face, which at another moment would have elicited anxious question. She was deeply hurt that Thyrza made so little account of her wishes; jealous of the influence of Totty Nancarrow; stirred with apprehensions as powerful as a mother's. On the other hand, it was Thyrza's nature to shrink into coldness before angry words. She suffered intensely when the voice which was of wont so affectionate turned to severity, but she could not excuse herself till the storm was over. And it was most often from the elder girl that the first words of reconcilement came.

'That's your Totty Nancarrow,' Lydia went on, with no check upon her tongue. 'Didn't I tell you what 'ud come of going about with her? What next, I should like to know! If you go on and sing in a public-house, I don't know what you won't do. I shall never trust you out by yourself again. You shan't go out at night at all, that's about it!'

'You've no right to speak to me like that, Lydia,' Thyrza replied, with indignation. The excitement and the fainting fit had strung her nerves painfully; and, for all her repentance, the echo of applause was still very sweet in her ears. This vehement reproach caused a little injury to her pride. 'It doesn't depend on you whether I go out or not. I'm not a child, and I can take care of myself. I haven't done nothing wrong.'

'You have—and you know you have! You knew I shouldn't have let you go near such a place. You know how I've begged you not to go with Totty Nancarrow, and how you've promised me you wouldn't be led into no harm. I shall never be able to trust you again. You *are* only a child! You show it! And in future you'll do as I tell you!'

Thyrza caught up her hat.

'I'm not going to stop here whilst you're in such a bad temper,' she said, in a trembling voice; 'you'll find that isn't the way to make me do as you wish.'

She stepped to the door. Lydia, frightened, sprang forward and barred the way.

'Go and sit down, Thyrza!'

'Let me go! What right have you to stop me?'

Then both were silent. At the same moment they became aware that a common incident of Saturday night was occurring had got thus far on their way home, the wife's shrill tongue in the street below. A half-tipsy man and a nagging woman running over every scale of scurrility and striking

every note of ingenious malice. The man was at length worked to a pitch of frenzy, and then—thud, thud, mingled with objurgations and shrill night-piercing yells. Fury little short of murderous was familiar enough to dwellers in this region, but that woman's bell-clapper tongue had struck shame into Lydia. She could not speak another angry word.

'Thyrza, take your hat off,' she said quietly, moving away a little from the door. Her cheeks burned, and she quivered in the subsidence of her temper.

Her sister did not obey, but, unable to stand longer, she went to a chair at a distance. The uproar in the street continued for a quarter of an hour, then by degrees passed on, the voice of the woman shrieking foul abuse till remoteness stifled it. Lydia forced herself to keep silence from good or ill; it was no use speaking the thoughts she had till morning. Thyrza sat with her eyes fixed on vacancy; she was so miserable, her heart had sunk so low, that tears would have come had she not forced them back. More than once of late she had known this mood, in which life lay about her barren and weary. She was very young to suffer that oppression of the world-worn; it was the penalty she paid for her birthright of heart and mind.

By midnight they were lying side by side, but no 'goodnight' had passed between them. When Thyrza's gentle breathing told that she slept, Lydia still lay with open eyes, watching the flicker of the street lamp upon the ceiling, hearing the sounds that came of mirth or brutality in streets near and far. She did not suffer in the same way as her sister; as soon as she had gently touched Thyrza's unconscious hand love came upon her with its warm solace; but her trouble was deep, and she looked into the future with many doubts.

The past she could scarcely deem other than happy, though a stranger would have thought it sad enough. Her mother she well remembered—a face pale and sweet, like Thyrza's: the eyes that have their sad beauty from foresight of death. Her father lived only a year longer, then she and the little one passed into the charge of Mr. Boddy, who was paid a certain small sum by Trent's employers, in consideration of the death by accident. Then came the commencement of Mr. Boddy's misfortunes; his shop and house were burnt down, he lost his limb in an endeavour to save his property, he lost his wife in consequence of the shock. Dreary things for the memory, yet they did not weigh upon Lydia; she was so happily endowed that her mind selected and dwelt on sunny hours, on kind looks and words which her strong heart cherished unassailably, on the mutual charities which sorrow had begotten rather than on the sorrow itself. Above all, the growing love of her dear one, of her to whom she was both mother and sister, had strengthened her against every trouble. Yet of late this strongest passion of her life had become a source of grave anxieties, as often as circumstance caused her to look beyond her contentment. Thyrza was so beautiful, and, it seemed to her, so weak; always dreaming of something beyond and above the life which was her lot; so deficient in the practical qualities which that life demanded. At moments Lydia saw her responsibility in a light which alarmed her.

They worked at a felt-hat factory, as 'trimmers;' that is to say, they finished hats by sewing in the lining, putting on the bands, and the like. In the busy season they could average together wages of about a pound a week; at dull times they earned less, and very occasionally had to support themselves for a week or two without employment. Since the age of fourteen Lydia herself had received help from no one; from sixteen she had lived in lodgings with Thyrza, independent. Mr. Boddy was then no longer able to do more than supply his own needs, for things had grown worse with him from year to year. Lydia occasionally found jobs for her free hours, and she had never yet wanted. She was strong, her health had scarcely ever given her a day's uneasiness; there never came to her a fear lest bread should fail. But Thyrza could not take life as she did. It was not enough for that imaginative nature to toil drearily day after day, and year after year, just for the sake of earning a livelihood. In a month she would be seventeen; it was too true, as she had said to-night, that she was no longer a child. What might happen if the elder sister's influence came to an end? Thyrza loved her: how Lydia would have laughed at anyone who hinted that the love could ever weaken! But it was not a guard against every danger.

It was inevitable that Lydia should have hoped that her sister might marry early. And one man she knew in whom—she scarcely could have told you why—her confidence was so strong that she would freely have entrusted him with Thyrza's fate. Thyrza could not bring herself to think of him as a husband. It was with Ackroyd that Lydia's thoughts were busy as she lay wakeful. Before to-night she had not pondered so continuously on what she knew of him. For some two years he had been an acquaintance, through the Bowers, and she had felt glad when it was plain that he sought Thyrza's society. 'Yes,' she had said to herself, 'I like him, and feel that he is to be relied upon.' Stories, to be sure, had reached her ears; something of an over-fondness for conviviality; but she had confidence. To-night she seemed called upon to review all her impressions. Why? Nothing new had happened. She longed for sleep, but it only came when dawn was white upon the blind.

When it was time to rise, neither spoke. Lydia prepared the breakfast as usual—it seemed quite natural that she should do nearly all the work of the home—and they sat down to it cheerlessly.

Since daybreak a mist had crept over the sky; it thinned the sunlight to a suffusion of grey and gold. Within the house there was the silence of Sunday morning; the street was still, save for the jodeling of a milkman as he wheeled his clattering cans from house to house. In that London on the other side of Thames, known to these girls with scarcely less of vagueness than to simple dwellers in country towns, the autumn-like air was foretaste of holiday; the martyrs of the Season and they who do the world's cleaner work knew that rest was near, spoke at breakfast of the shore and the mountain. Even to Lydia, weary after her short sleep and unwontedly dejected, there came a wish that it were possible to quit the streets for but one day, and sit somewhere apart under the open sky. It was not often that so fantastic a dream visited her.

In dressing, Thyrza had left her hair unbraided. Lydia always did that for her. When the table was cleared, the former took up a story-paper which she bought every week, and made a show of reading. Lydia went about her accustomed tasks.

Presently she took a brush and comb and went behind her sister's chair. She began to unloosen the rough coils in which the golden hair was pinned together. It was always a joy to her to bathe her hands in the warm, soft torrent. With delicate care she combed out every intricacy, and brushed the ordered tresses till the light gleamed on their smooth surface; then with skilful fingers she wove the braid, tying it with a blue ribbon so that the ends hung loose. The task completed, it was her custom to bend over the little head and snatch an inverted kiss, always a moment of laughter. This morning she omitted that; she was moving sadly away, when she noticed that the face turned a little, a very little.

'Isn't it right?' she asked, keeping her eyes down.

'I think so—it doesn't matter.'

She drew near again, as if to inspect her work. Perhaps there was a slight lack of smoothness over the temple; she touched the spot with her fingers.

'Why are you so unkind to me, Thyrza?'

The words had come involuntarily; the voice shook as they were spoken.

'I don't mean to be, Lyddy—you know I don't.'

'But you do things that you know 'll make me angry. I'm quick-tempered, and I couldn't bear to think of you going to that place; I ought to have spoke in a different way.'

'Who told you I'd been singing?'

'Mrs. Jarmey. I'm very glad she did; it doesn't seem any harm to you, Thyrza, but it does to me. Dear, have you ever sung at such places before?'

Thyrza shook her head.

'Will you promise me never to go there again?'

'I don't want to go. But I get no harm. They were very pleased with my singing. Annie West was there, and several other girls. Why do you make so much of it, Lyddy?'

'Because I'm older than you, Thyrza; and if you'll only trust me, and do as I wish, you'll see some day that I was right. I know you're a good girl; I don't think a wrong thought ever came into your

head. It isn't that, it's because you can't go about the streets and into public-houses without hearing bad things and seeing bad people. I want to keep you away from everything that isn't homelike and quiet. I want you to love me more than anyone else!'

'I do, Lyddy! I do, dear! It's only that I—'

'What—?'

'I don't know how it is. I'm discontented. There's never any change. How can you be so happy day after day? I love to be with you, but—if we could go and live somewhere else! I should like to see a new place. I've been reading there about the seaside what it must be like! I want to know things. You don't understand me?'

'I think I do. I felt a little the same when I heard Mrs. Isaacs and her daughter talking about Margate yesterday. But we shall be better off some day, see if we aren't! Try your best not to think about those things. Suppose you ask Mr. Grail to lend you a book to read? I met Mrs. Grail downstairs last night, and she asked if we'd go down and have tea to-day. I can't, because Mary's coming, but you might. And I'm sure he'd lend you something nice if you asked him.'

'I don't think I durst. He always sits so quiet, and he's such a queer man.'

'Yes, he is rather queer, but he speaks very kind.'

'I'll see. But you mustn't speak so cross to me if I do wrong, Lyddy. I felt as if I should like to go away, some time when you didn't know. I did, really!'

Lydia gazed at her anxiously.

'I don't think you'd ever have the heart to do that, Thyrza,' she said, in a low voice.

'No,' she shook her head, smiling. 'I couldn't do without you. And now kiss me properly, like you always do.'

Lydia stood behind the chair again, and the laughing caress was exchanged.

'I should stay,' Thyrza went on, 'if it was only to have you do my hair. I do so like to feel your soft hands!'

'Soft hands! Great coarse things. Just look!'

She took one of Thyrza's, and held it beside her own. The difference was noticeable enough; Lydia's was not ill-shapen, but there were marks on it of all the rough household work which she had never permitted her sister to do. Thyrza's was delicate, supple, beautiful in its kind as her face.

'I don't care!' she said laughing. 'It's a good, soft, sleepy hand.'

'Sleepy, child!'

'I mean it always makes me feel dozy when it's doing my hair.'

There was no more cloud between them. The morning passed on with sisterly talk. Lydia had wisely refrained from exacting promises; she hoped to resume the subject before long—together with another that was in her mind. Thyrza, too, had something to speak of, but could not bring herself to it as yet.

Though it was so hot, they had to keep a small fire for cooking the dinner. This meal consisted of a small piece of steak, chosen from the odds and ends thrown together on the front of a butcher's shop, and a few potatoes. It was not always they had meat; yet they never went hungry, and, in comparing herself with others she knew, it sometimes made Lydia a little unhappy to think how well she lived.

Then began the unutterable dreariness of a Sunday afternoon. From the lower part of the house sounded the notes of a concertina; it was Mr. Jarmey who played. He had the habit of doing so whilst half asleep, between dinner and tea. With impartiality he passed from strains of popular hymnody to the familiar ditties of the music hall, lavishing on each an excess of sentiment. He shook pathetically on top notes and languished on final chords. A dolorous music!

The milkman came along the street. He was followed by a woman who wailed 'wa-ater-creases!' Then the concertina once more possessed the stillness. Few pedestrians were abroad; the greater part of the male population of Lambeth slumbered after the baked joint and flagon of ale. Yet here and

there a man in his shirt-sleeves leaned forth despondently from a window or sat in view within, dozing over the Sunday paper.

A rattling of light wheels drew near, and a nasal voice cried "Okey-pokey! 'Okey-'okey-'okey Penny a lump!' It was the man who sold ice-cream. He came to a stop, and half a dozen boys gathered about his truck. The delicacy was dispensed to them in little green and yellow glasses, from which they extracted it with their tongues. The vendor remained for a few minutes, then on again with his "Okey'-okey-'okey!' sung through the nose.

Next came a sound of distressful voices, whining the discords of a mendicant psalm. A man, a woman, and two small children crawled along the street; their eyes surveyed the upper windows. All were ragged and filthy; the elders bore the unmistakable brand of the gin-shop, and the children were visaged like debased monkeys. Occasionally a copper fell to them, in return for which the choragus exclaimed 'Gord bless yer!'

Thyrza sat in her usual place by the window, now reading for a few minutes, now dreaming. Lydia had some stockings to be darned; she became at length so silent that her sister turned to look at her. Her head had dropped forward. She slumbered for a few minutes, then started to consciousness again, and laughed when she saw Thyrza regarding her.

'I suppose Mary'll be here directly?' she said. 'I'd better put this work out of sight.' And as she began to spread the cloth, she asked: 'What'll you do whilst we're at chapel, Thyrza?'

'I think I'll go and have tea with Mrs. Grail; then I'll see if I dare ask for a book.'

'You've made up your mind not to go out?'

'There was something I wanted to tell you. I met Mr. Ackroyd as I was coming home last night. I told him I couldn't come out alone, and I said I couldn't be sure whether you'd come or not.'

'But what a pity!' returned Lydia. 'You knew I was going to chapel. I'm afraid he'll wait for us.'

'Yes, but I somehow didn't like to say we wouldn't go at all. What time is he going to be there?'

'He said at six o'clock.'

'Would you mind just running out and telling him? Perhaps you'll be going past with Mary, not long after?'

'That's a nice job you give me!' remarked Lydia, with a half smile.

'But I know you don't mind it, Lyddy. It isn't the first thing you've done for me.'

It was said with so much *naivete* that Lydia could not but laugh.

'I should like it much better if you'd go yourself,' she replied. 'But I'm afraid it's no good asking.'

'Not a hit! And, Lyddy, I told Mr. Ackroyd that it would always be the same. He understands now.'

The other made no reply.

'You won't be cross about it?'

'No, dear; there's nothing to be cross about. But I'm very sorry.'

The explanation passed in a tone of less earnestness than either would have anticipated. They did not look at each other, and they dismissed the subject as soon as possible. Then came two rings at the house-bell, signifying the arrival of their visitor.

Mary Bower and Lydia had been close friends for four or five years, yet they had few obvious points of similarity, and their differences were marked enough. The latter increased; for Mary attached herself more closely to religious observances, whilst Lydia continued to declare with native frankness that she could not feel it incumbent upon her to give grave attention to such matters. Mary grieved over this attitude in one whose goodness of heart she could not call in question; it troubled her as an inconsequence in nature; she cherished a purpose of converting Lydia, and had even brought herself to the point of hoping that some sorrow might befall her friend—nothing of too sad a nature, but still a grief which might turn her thoughts inward. Yet, had anything of the kind come to pass, Mary would have been the first to hasten with consolation.

Thyrza went downstairs, and the two gossiped as tea was made ready. Mary had already heard of the incident at the 'Prince Albert;' such a piece of news could not be long in reaching Mrs. Bower's. She wished to speak of it, yet was in uncertainty whether Lydia had already been told. The latter was the first to bring forward the subject.

'It's quite certain she oughtn't to make a friend of that girl Totty,' Mary said, with decision. 'You must insist that it is stopped, Lydia.'

'I shan't do any good that way,' replied the other, shaking her head. 'I lost my temper last night, like a silly, and of course only harm came of it.'

'But there's no need to lose your temper. You must tell her she's *not* to speak to the girl again, and there's an end of it!'

'Thyrza's too old for that, dear. I must lead her by kindness, or I can't lead her at all. I don't think, though, she'll ever do such a thing as that again. I know what a temptation it was; she does sing so sweetly. But she won't do it again now she knows how I think about it.'

Mary appeared doubtful. Given a suggestion of iniquity, and it was her instinct rather to fear than to hope. Secretly she had no real liking for Thyrza; something in that complex nature repelled her. As she herself had said: 'Thyrza was not easy to understand,' but she did understand that the girl's essential motives were of a kind radically at enmity with her own. Thyrza, it seemed to her, was worldly in the most hopeless way.

'You'll be sorry for it if you're not firm,' she remarked.

Lydia made no direct reply, but after a moment's musing she said:

'If only she could think of Mr. Ackroyd!'

She had not yet spoken so plainly of this to Mary; the latter was surprised by the despondency of her tone.

'But I thought they were often together?'

'She's only been out with him when I went as well, and last night she told him it was no use.'

'Well, I can't say I'm sorry to hear that,' Mary replied with the air of one who spoke an unpleasant truth.

'Why not, Mary?'

'I think he's likely to do her every bit as much harm as Totty Nancarrow.'

'What *do* you mean, Mary?' There was a touch of indignation in Lydia's voice. 'What harm can Mr. Ackroyd do to Thyrza?'

'Not the kind of harm you're thinking of, dear. But if I had a sister I know I shouldn't like to see her marry Mr. Ackroyd. He's got no religion, and what's more he's always talking against religion. Father says he made a speech last week at that place in Westminster Bridge Road where the Atheists have their meetings. I don't deny there's something nice about him, but I wouldn't trust a man of that kind.'

Lydia delayed her words a little. She kept her eyes on the table; her forehead was knitted.

'I can't help what he thinks about religion,' she replied at length, with firmness. 'He's a good man, I'm quite sure of that.'

'Lydia, he can't be good if he does his best to ruin people's souls.'

'I don't know anything about that, Mary. Whatever he says, he says because he believes it and thinks it right. Why, there's Mr. Grail thinks in the same way, I believe; at all events, he never goes to church or chapel. And he's a friend of Mr. Ackroyd's.'

'But we don't know anything about Mr. Grail.'

'We don't know much, but it's quite enough to talk to him for a few minutes to know he's a man that wouldn't say or do anything wrong.'

'He must be a wonderful man, Lydia.'

These Sunday conversations were always fruitful of trouble. Mary was prepared by her morning and afternoon exercises to be more aggressive and uncompromising than usual. But the present

difficulty appeared a graver one than any that had yet risen between them. Lydia had never spoken in the tone which marked her rejoinder:

'Really, Mary, it's as if you couldn't put faith in no one! You know I don't feel the same as you do about religion and such things, and I don't suppose I ever shall. When I like people, I like them; I can't ask what they believe and what they don't believe. We'd better not talk about it any more.'

Mary's face assumed rather a hard look.

'Just as you like, my dear,' she said.

There ensued an awkward silence, which Lydia at length broke by speech on some wholly different subject. Mary with difficulty adapted herself to the change; tea was finished rather uncomfortably.

It was six o'clock. Lydia, hearing the hour strike, knew that Ackroyd would be waiting at the end of Walnut Tree Walk. She was absent-minded, halting between a desire to go at once, and tell him that they could not come, and a disinclination not perhaps very clearly explained. The minutes went on. It seemed to be decided for her that he should learn the truth by their failure to join him.

Church bells began to sound. Mary rose and put on her hat, then, taking up the devotional books she had with her, offered her hand as if to say good-bye.

'But,' said Lydia in surprise, 'I'm going with you.'

'I didn't suppose you would,' the other returned quietly.

'But haven't you had tea with me?'

Mary had not now to learn that her friend held a promise inviolable; her surprise would have been great if Lydia had allowed her to go forth alone. She smiled.

'Will there be nice singing?' Lydia asked, as she prepared herself quickly. 'I do really like the singing, at all events, Mary.'

The other shook her head, sadly.

They left the house and turned towards Kennington Road. Before Lydia had gone half a dozen steps she saw that Ackroyd was waiting at the end of the street. She felt a pang of self-reproach; it was wrong of her to have allowed him to stand in miserable uncertainty all this time; she ought to have gone out at six o'clock. In a low voice she said to her companion:

'There's Mr. Ackroyd. I want just to speak a word to him. If you'll go on when we get up, I'll soon overtake you.'

Mary acquiesced in silence. Lydia, approaching, saw disappointment on the young man's face. He raised his hat to her—an unwonted attention in these parts—and she gave him her hand.

'I'm going to chapel,' she said playfully.

He had a sudden hope.

'Then your sister'll come out?'

'No, Mr. Ackroyd; she can't to-night. She's having tea with Mrs. Grail.'

He looked down the street. Lydia was impelled to say earnestly:

'Some time, perhaps! Thyrza is very young yet, Mr. Ackroyd. She thinks of such different things.'

'What does she think of?' he asked, rather gloomily.

'I mean she—she must get older and know you better. Good-bye! Mary Bower is waiting for me.'

She ran on, and Ackroyd sauntered away without a glance after her.

CHAPTER VI
DISINHERITED

When Thyrza left the two at tea and went downstairs, she knocked at the door of the front parlour on the ground floor. The room which she entered was but dimly lighted; thick curtains encroached upon each side of the narrow window, which was also shadowed above by a valance with long tassels, whilst in front of it stood a table with a great pot of flowering musk. The atmosphere was close; with the odour of the plant blended the musty air which comes from old and neglected furniture. Mrs. Grail, Gilbert Grail's mother, was an old lady with an unusual dislike for the upset of household cleaning, and as her son's prejudice, like that of most men, tended in the same direction, this sitting-room, which they used in common, had known little disturbance since they entered it a year and a half ago. Formerly they had occupied a house in Battersea; it was given up on the death of Gilbert's sister, and these lodgings taken in Walnut Tree Walk.

A prominent object in the room was a bookcase, some six feet high, quite full of books, most of them of shabby exterior. They were Gilbert's purchases at second-hand stalls during the past fifteen years. Their variety indicated a mind of liberal intelligence. Works of history and biography predominated, but poetry and fiction were also represented on the shelves. Odd volumes of expensive publications looked forth plaintively here and there, and many periodical issues stood unbound.

Another case, a small one with glass doors, contained literature of another order—some thirty volumes which had belonged to Gilbert's father, and were now his mother's peculiar study. They were translations of sundry works of Swedenborg, and productions put forth by the Church of the New Jerusalem. Mrs. Grail was a member of that church. She occasionally visited a meeting-place in Brixton, but for the most part was satisfied with conning the treatises of the mystic, by preference that on 'Heaven and Hell,' which she read in the first English edition, an old copy in boards, much worn.

She was a smooth-faced, gentle-mannered woman, not without dignity as she rose to receive Thyrza and guided her to a comfortable seat. Her voice was habitually subdued to the limit of audibleness; she spoke with precision, and in language very free from vulgarisms either of thought or phrase. Her taste had always been for a home-keeping life; she dreaded gossipers, and only left the house when it was absolutely necessary, then going forth closely veiled. With the landlady she held no more intercourse than arose from the weekly payment of rent; the other lodgers in the house only saw her by chance on rare occasions. Her son left home and returned with much regularity, he also seeming to desire privacy above all things. Mrs. Jarmey had at first been disposed to take this reserve somewhat ill. When she knocked at Mrs. Grail's door on some paltry excuse for seeing the inside of the room, and found that the old lady exchanged brief words with her on the threshold, she wondered who these people might be who thought themselves too good for wonted neighbourship. In time, however, her feeling changed, and she gave everybody to understand that her ground-floor lodgers were of the highest respectability, inmates such as did not fall to the lot of every landlady.

Gilbert was surprised when, of her own motion, his mother made overtures to the sisters who lived at the top of the house. Neither Lydia nor Thyrza was at first disposed to respond very warmly; they agreed that the old lady was doubtless very respectable, but, at the same time, decidedly queer in her way of speaking. But during the past few months they had overcome this reluctance, and were now on a certain footing of intimacy with Mrs. Grail, who made it no secret that she took great interest in Thyrza. Thyrza always entered the sitting-room with a feeling of awe. The dim light, the old lady's low voice, above all, the books—in her eyes a remarkable library—impressed her strongly. If Grail himself were present, he was invariably reading; Thyrza held him profoundly learned, a judgment confirmed by his mother's way of speaking of him. For Mrs. Grail regarded her son with distinct

reverence. He, in turn, was tenderly respectful to her; they did not know what it was to exchange an unkind or an impatient word.

Thyrza liked especially to have tea here on Sunday. The appointments of the table seemed to her luxurious, for the tea-service was uniform and of pretty, old-fashioned pattern, and simple little dainties of a kind new to her were generally forthcoming. Moreover, from her entrance to her leave-taking, she was flattered by the pleasantest attentions. The only other table at which she sometimes sat as a guest was Mrs. Bower's; between the shopkeeper's gross good-nature and the well-mannered kindness of Mrs. Grail there was a broad distinction, and Thyrza was very ready to appreciate it. For she was sensible of refinements; numberless little personal delicacies distinguished her from the average girl of her class, and even from Lydia. The meals which she and her sister took in their own room might be ever so poor; they were always served with a modest grace which perhaps would not have marked them if it had depended upon Lydia alone. In this respect, as in many others, Thyrza had repaid her sister's devotion with subtle influences tending to a comely life.

Once, when she had gone down alone to have tea, she said to Lydia on her return. 'Downstairs they treat me as if I was a lady,' and it was spoken with the simple satisfaction which was one of her charming traits.

Till quite lately Gilbert had scarcely conversed with her at all. When he broke his habitual silence he addressed himself to Lydia; if he did speak to the younger girl it was with studied courtesy and kindness, but he seemed unable to overcome a sort of shyness with which she had troubled him since the beginning of their acquaintance. It was noticeable in his manner this evening when he shook hands with a murmured word or two. Thyrza, however, appeared a little less timid than usual; she just met his look, and in a questioning way which he could not understand at the time. The truth was, Thyrza wondered whether he had heard of her escapade of the night before; she tried to read his expression, searching for any hint of disapproval.

The easy chair was always given to her when she entered. So seldom she sat on anything easier than the stiff cane-bottomed seats of her own room that this always seemed luxurious. By degrees she had permitted herself to lean back in it. She did so want Lyddy to know what it was like to sit in that chair; but it had never yet been possible to effect an exchange. It might have offended Mrs. Grail, a thing on no account to be risked.

'Lyddy has Mary Bower to tea,' she said on her arrival this evening. 'They're going to chapel. You don't mind me coming alone, Mrs. Grail?'

'You're never anything but welcome, my dear,' murmured the old lady, pressing the little hand in both her own.

Tea was soon ready. Mrs. Grail talked with pleasant continuousness, as usual. She had fallen upon reminiscences, and spoke of Lambeth as she had known it when a girl; it was her birthplace, and through life she had never strayed far away. She regarded the growth of population, the crowding of mean houses where open spaces used to be, the whole change of times in fact, as deplorable. One would have fancied from her descriptions that the Lambeth of sixty years ago was a delightful rustic village.

After tea Thyrza resumed the low chair and folded her hands, full of contentment. Mrs. Grail took the tea-things from the room and was absent about a quarter of an hour. Thyrza, left alone with the man who for her embodied so many mysteries, let her eyes stray over the bookshelves. She felt it very unlikely that any book there would be within the compass of her understanding; doubtless they dealt with the secrets of learning—the strange, high things for which her awed imagination had no name. Gilbert had seated himself in a shadowed corner; his face was bent downwards. Just when Thyrza was about to put some timid question with regard to the books, he looked at her and said:

'Do you ever go to Westminster Abbey?'

The intellectual hunger of his face was softened; he did not smile, but kept a mild gravity of expression which showed that he had a pleasure in the girl's proximity. When he had spoken he stroked his forehead with the tips of his fingers, a nervous action.

'I've never been inside,' Thyrza made answer. 'What is there to see?'

'It's the place, you know, where great men have been buried for hundreds of years. I should like, if I could, to spend a little time there every day.'

'Can you see the graves?' Thyrza asked.

'Yes, many. And on the stones you read who they were that lie there. There are the graves of kings, and of men much greater than kings.'

'Greater than kings! Who were they, Mr. Grail?'

She had rested her elbow on the arm of the chair, and her fingers just touched her chin. She regarded him with a gaze of deep curiosity.

'Men who wrote books,' he answered, with a slight smile.

Thyrza dropped her eyes. In her thought of books it had never occurred to her that any special interest could attach to the people who wrote them; indeed, she had perhaps never asked herself how printed matter came into existence. Even among the crowd of average readers we know how commonly a book will be run through without a glance at its title-page.

Gilbert continued:

'I always come away from the Abbey with fresh courage. If I'm tired and out of spirits, I go there, and it makes me feel as if I daren't waste a minute of the time when I'm free to try and learn something.'

It was a strange impulse that made him speak in this way to an untaught child. With those who were far more likely to understand him he was the most reticent of men.

'But you know a great deal, Mr. Grail,' Thyrza said with surprise, looking again at the bookshelves.

'You mustn't think that. I had very little teaching when I was a lad, and ever since I've had very little either of time or means to teach myself. If I only knew those few books well, it would be something, but there are some of them I've never got to yet.'

'Those *few* books!' Thyrza exclaimed. 'But I never thought anybody had so many, before I came into this room.'

'I should like you to see the library at the British Museum. Every book that is published in England is sent there. There's a large room where people sit and study any book they like, all day long, and day after day. Think what a life that must be!'

'Those are rich people, I suppose,' Thyrza remarked. 'They haven't to work for their living.'

'Not rich, all of them. But they haven't to work with their hands.'

He became silent. In his last words there was a little bitterness. Thyrza glanced at him; he seemed to have forgotten her presence, and his face had the wonted look of trouble kept under.

Then Mrs. Grail returned. She sat down near Thyrza, and, after a little more of her pleasant talk, said, turning to her son:

'Could you find something to read us. Gilbert?'

He thought for a moment, then reached down a book of biographies, writing of a popular colour, not above Thyrza's understanding. It contained a life of Sir Thomas More, or rather a pleasant story founded upon his life, with much about his daughter Margaret.

'Yes, that'll do nicely,' was Mrs. Grail's opinion.

He began with a word or two of explanation to Thyrza, then entered upon the narrative. As soon as the proposal was made, Thyrza's face had lighted up with pleasure; she listened intently, leaning a little forward in her chair, her hands folded together. Gilbert, if he raised his eyes from the page, did not look at her. Mrs. Grail interrupted once or twice with a question or a comment. The reading was

good; Gilbert's voice gave life to description and conversation, and supplied an interest even where the writer was in danger of growing dull.

When the end was reached, Thyrza recovered herself with the sigh which follows strained attention. But she was not in a mood to begin conversation again; her mind had got something to work upon, it would keep her awake far into the night with a succession of half-realised pictures. What a world was that of which a glimpse had been given her! Here, indeed, was something remote from her tedious life. Her brain was full of vague glories, of the figures of kings and queens, of courtiers and fair ladies, of things nobly said and done; and her heart throbbed with indignation at wrongs greater than any she had ever imagined. When it had all happened she knew not; surely very long ago! But the names she knew, Chelsea, Lambeth, the Tower—these gave a curiously fantastic reality to the fairy tale. And one thing she saw with uttermost distinctness: that boat going down the stream of Thames, and the dear, dreadful head dropped into it from the arch above. She would go and stand on the bridge and think of it.

Ah, she must tell Lyddy all that! Better still, she must read it to her. She found courage to say:

'Could you spare that book, Mr. Grail? Could you lend it me for a day or two? I'd be very careful with it.'

'I shall be very glad to lend it you,' Gilbert answered. His voice changed somehow from that in which he usually spoke.

She received it from him and held it on her lap with both hands. She would not look into it till alone in her room; and, having secured it, she did not wish to stay longer.

'Going already?' Mrs. Grail said, seeing her rise.

'Lyddy 'll be back very soon,' was the reply. 'I think I'd better go now.'

She shook hands with both of them, and they heard her run up the thin-carpeted stairs.

Mother and son sat in silence for some minutes. Gilbert had taken another book, and seemed to be absorbed in it; Mrs. Grail had a face of meditation. Occasionally she looked upwards, as though on the track of some memory which she strove to make clear.

'Gilbert,' she began at length, suggestively.

He raised his eyes and regarded her in an absent way.

'I've been trying for a long time to remember what that child's face reminded me of. Every time I see her, I make sure I've seen someone like her before, and now I think I've got it.'

Gilbert was used to a stream of amusing fancifulness in his mother; analysis and resemblances were dear to her; possibly the Biblical theories which she had imbibed were in some degree answerable for the characteristic.

'And who does she remind you of?' he asked.

'Of somebody whose name I can't think of. You remember the school in Lambeth Road where Lizzie used to go?'

She referred to a time five-and-twenty years gone by, when Gilbert's sister was a child. He nodded.

'It was Mrs. Green's school, you know, and soon after Lizzie began to go, there was an assistant teacher taken on. Now can you think what her name was? You must remember that Lizzie used to walk home along with her almost every day. Miss—, Miss—. Oh, dear me, what *was* that name?'

Gilbert smiled and shook his head.

'I can't help you, mother. I don't even remember any such thing.'

'What a poor memory you have in ordinary things, Gilbert! I wonder at it, with your mind for study.'

'But what's the connection?'

'Why, Thyrza has got her very face. It's just come to me. I'm sure that was her mother.'

'But how impossible that you should have that woman's face still in your mind!' Gilbert protested, good-humouredly.

'My dear, don't be so hasty. It's as clear to me as if Lizzie had just come in and said, "Miss Denny brought me home." Why, there *is* the name! It fell from my tongue! To be sure; Miss Denny! A pale, sad-looking little thing, she was. Often and often I've been at the window and seen her coming along the street hand in hand with your sister. Now I'll ask Thyrza if her mother's name wasn't Denny, and if she didn't teach at Mrs. Green's school. Depend upon it, I'm right, Gilbert!'

Gilbert still smiled very incredulously.

'It'll be a marvellous thing if it turns out to be true,' he said.

'Oh, but I have a wonderful memory for faces. I always used to think there was something very good in that teacher's look. I don't think I ever spoke to her, though she went backwards and forwards past our house in Brook Street for nearly two years. Then I didn't see her any more. Depend upon it, she went away to be married. Lizzie had left a little before that. Oh yes, it explains why I seemed to know Thyrza the first time I saw her.'

Mrs. Grail was profoundly satisfied. Again a short silence ensued.

'How nicely they keep themselves!' she resumed, half to herself. 'I'm sure Lydia's one of the most careful girls I ever knew. But Thyrza's my favourite. How she enjoyed your reading, Gilbert!'

He nodded, but kept his attention on the book. His mother just glanced at him, and presently continued:

'I do hope she won't be spoilt. She is very pretty, isn't she? But they're not girls for going out much, I can see. And Thyrza's always glad when I ask her to come and have tea with us. I suppose they haven't many friends.'

It was quite against Mrs. Grail's wont to interrupt thus when her son had settled down to read. Gilbert averted his eyes from the page, and, after reflecting a little, said:

'Ackroyd knows them.'

His mother looked at him closely. He seemed to be absorbed again.

'Does he speak to you about them, Gilbert?'

'He's mentioned them once or twice.'

'Perhaps that's why Lydia goes out to chapel,' the old lady said, with a smile.

'No, I don't think so.'

The reply was so abrupt, so nearly impatient, that Mrs. Grail made an end of her remarks. In a little while she too began to read.

They had supper at nine; at ten o'clock Mrs. Grail kissed her son's forehead and bade him good-night, adding, 'Don't sit long, my dear.' Every night she took leave of him with the same words, and they were not needless. Gilbert too often forgot the progress of time, and spent in study the hours which were demanded for sleep.

His daily employment was at a large candle and soap factory. By such work he had earned his living for more than twenty years. As a boy, he had begun with wages of four shillings a week, his task being to trim with a knife the rough edges of tablets of soap just stamped out. By degrees he had risen to a weekly income of forty shillings, occasionally increased by pay for overtime. Beyond this he was not likely to get. Men younger than he had passed him, attaining the position of foreman and the like; some had earned money by inventions which they put at the service of their employers; but Gilbert could hope for nothing more than the standing of a trustworthy mechanic, who, as long as he keeps his strength, can count on daily bread. His heart was not in his work; it would have been strange if he had thriven by an industry which was only a weariness to him.

His hours were from six in the morning to seven at night. Ah, that terrible rising at five o'clock, when it seemed at first as if he must fall back again in sheer anguish of fatigue, when his eyeballs throbbed to the light and the lids were as if weighted with iron, when the bitterness of the day before him was like poison in his heart! He could not live as his fellow-workmen did, coming home to satisfy his hunger and spend a couple of hours in recreation, then to well-earned sleep. Every minute of freedom, of time in which he was no longer a machine but a thinking and desiring man, he held

precious as fine gold. How could he yield to heaviness and sleep, when books lay open before him, and Knowledge, the goddess of his worship, whispered wondrous promises? To Gilbert, a printed page was as the fountain of life; he loved literature passionately, and hungered to know the history of man's mind through all the ages. This distinguished him markedly from the not uncommon working man who zealously pursues some chosen branch of study. Such men ordinarily take up subjects of practical bearing; physical science is wont to be their field; or if they study history it is from the point of view of current politics. Taste for literature pure and simple, and disinterested love of historical search, are the rarest things among the self-taught; naturally so, seeing how seldom they come of anything but academical tillage of the right soil. The average man of education is fond of literature because the environment of his growth has made such fondness a second nature. Gilbert had conceived his passion by mere grace. It had developed in him slowly. At twenty years he was a young fellow of seemingly rather sluggish character, without social tendencies, without the common ambitions of his class, much given to absence of mind. About that time he came across one of the volumes of the elder D'Israeli, and, behold, he had found himself. Reading of things utterly unknown to him, he was inspired with strange delights; a mysterious fascination drew him on amid names which were only a sound; a great desire was born in him, and its object was seen in every volume that met his eye. Had he then been given means and leisure, he would have become at the least a man of noteworthy learning. No such good fortune awaited him. Daily his thirteen hours went to the manufacture of candles, and the evening leisure, with one free day in the week, was all he could ever hope for.

At five-and-twenty he had a grave illness. Insufficient rest and ceaseless trouble of spirit brought him to death's door. For a long time it seemed as if he must content himself with earning his bread. He had no right to call upon others to bear the burden of his needs. His brother; a steady hard-headed mechanic, who was doing well in the Midlands and had just married, spoke to him with uncompromising common sense; if he chose to incapacitate himself, he must not look to his relatives to support him. Silently Gilbert acquiesced; silently he went back to the factory, and, when he came home of nights, sat with eyes gazing blankly before him. His mother lived with him, she and his sister; the latter went out to work; all were dependent upon the wages of the week. Nearly a year went by, during which Gilbert did not open a book. It was easier for him, he said, not to read at all than to measure his reading by the demands of his bodily weakness. He would have sold his handful of books, sold them in sheer bitterness of mind, but this his mother interfered to prevent.

But he could not live so. There was now a danger that the shadow of misery would darken into madness, Little by little he resumed his studious habits, yet with prudence. At thirty his bodily strength seemed to have consolidated itself; if he now and then exceeded the allotted hours at night, he did not feel the same evil results as formerly. His sister was a very dear companion to him; she had his own tastes in a simpler form, and woman's tact enabled her to draw him into the repose of congenial talk when she and her mother were troubled by signs of overwork in him. He purchased a book as often as he could reconcile himself to the outlay, and his knowledge grew, though he seemed to himself ever on the mere threshold of the promised land, hopeless of admission.

Then came his sister's death, and the removal from Battersea back to Lambeth. Henceforth it would be seldomer than ever that he could devote a shilling to the enrichment of his shelves. When both he and Lizzie earned wages, the future did not give much trouble, but now all providence was demanded. His brother in the Midlands made contribution towards the mother's support, but Henry had a family of his own, and it was only right that Gilbert should bear the greater charge. Gilbert was nearing five-and-thirty.

By nature he was a lonely man. Amusement such as his world offered had always been savourless to him, and he had never sought familiar fellowship beyond his home. Even there it often happened that for days he kept silence; he would eat his meal when he came from work, then take his book to a corner, and be mute, answering any needful question with a gesture or the briefest word. At such times his face had the lines of age; you would have deemed him a man weighed upon by some

vast sorrow. And was he not? His life was speeding by; already the best years were gone, the years of youth and force and hope—nay, hope he could not be said to have known, unless it were for a short space when first the purpose of his being dawned upon consciousness; and the end of that had been bitter enough. The purpose he knew was frustrated. The 'Might have been,' which is 'also called No more, Too late, Farewell,' often stared him in the eyes with those unchanging orbs of ghastliness, chilling the flow of his blood and making life the cruellest of mockeries. Yet he was not driven to that kind of resentment which makes the revolutionary spirit. His personality was essentially that of a student; conservative instincts were stronger in him than the misery which accused his fortune. A touch of creative genius, and you had the man whose song would lead battle against the hoary iniquities of the world. That was denied him; he could only eat his own heart in despair, his protest against the outrage of fate a desolate silence.

A lonely man, yet a tender one. The capacity of love was not less in him than the capacity of knowledge. Yet herein too he was wronged by circumstance. In youth an extreme shyness held him from intercourse with all women save his mother and his sister; he was conscious of his lack of ease in dialogue, of an awkwardness of manner and an unattractiveness of person. On summer evenings, when other young fellows were ready enough in finding companions for their walk, Gilbert would stray alone in the quietest streets until he tired himself; then go home and brood over fruitless longings. In love, as afterwards in study, he had his ideal; sometimes he would catch a glimpse of some face in the street at night, and would walk on with the feeling that his happiness had passed him—if only he could have turned and pursued it! In all women he had supreme faith; that one woman whom his heart imagined was a pure and noble creature, with measureless aspiration, womanhood glorified in her to the type of the upward striving soul—she did not come to him; his life remained chaste and lonely.

Neither had he friends. There were at all times good fellows to be found among those with whom he worked, but again his shyness held him apart, and indeed he felt that intercourse with them would afford him but brief satisfaction. Occasionally some man more thoughtful than the rest would be drawn to him by curiosity, but, finding himself met with so much reserve, involuntary in Gilbert, would become doubtful and turn elsewhither for sympathy. Yet in this respect Grail improved as time went on; as his character ripened, he was readier to gossip now and then of common things with average associates. He knew, however, that he was not much liked, and this naturally gave a certain coldness to his behaviour. Perhaps the very first man for whom he found himself entertaining something like warmth of kindness was Luke Ackroyd. Ackroyd came to the factory shortly after Gilbert had gone to live in Walnut Tree Walk, and in the course of a few weeks the two had got into the habit of walking their common way homewards together. As might have been anticipated, it was a character very unlike his own which had at length attached Gilbert. To begin with, Ackroyd was pronounced in radicalism, was aggressive and at times noisy; then, he was far from possessing Grail's moral stability, and did not care to conceal his ways of amusing himself; lastly, his intellectual tastes were of the scientific order. Yet Gilbert from the first liked him; he felt that there was no little good in the fellow, if only it could be fostered at the expense of his weaker characteristics. Yet those very weaknesses had much to do with his amiability. This they had in common: both aspired to something that fortune had denied them. Ackroyd had his idea of a social revolution, and, though it seemed doubtful whether he was exactly the man to claim a larger sphere for the energies of his class, his thought often had genuine nobleness, clearly recognisable by Gilbert. Ackroyd had brain-power above the average, and it was his right to strive for a better lot than the candle-factory could assure him. So Grail listened with a smile of much indulgence to the young fellow's fuming against the order of things, and if he now and then put in a critical remark was not sorry to have it scornfully swept aside with a flood of vehement words. He felt, perchance, that a share of such vigour might have made his own existence more fruitful.

This was Gilbert Grail at the time with which we are now concerned. His mother believed that she had discovered in him something of a new mood of late, a tendency to quiet cheerfulness, and she attributed it in part to the healthfulness of intercourse with a friend; partly she assigned to it another reason. But her assumption did not receive much proof from Gilbert's demeanour when left alone in the sitting-room this Sunday night. Since Thyrza's departure, he had in truth only made pretence of reading, and now that his mother was gone, he let the book fall from his hands. His countenance was fixed in a supreme sadness, his lips were tightly closed, and at times moved, as if in the suppression of pain. Hopelessness in youth, unless it be justified by some direst ruin of the future, is wont to touch us either with impatience or with a comforting sense that reaction is at hand; in a man of middle age it moves us with pure pathos. The sight of Gilbert as he sat thus motionless would have brought tears to kindly eyes. The past was a burden on his memory, the future lay before him like a long road over which he must wearily toil—the goal, frustration. To-night he could not forget himself in the thoughts of other men. It was one of the dread hours, which at intervals came upon him, when the veil was lifted from the face of destiny, and he was bidden gaze himself into despair. At such times he would gladly have changed beings with the idlest and emptiest of his fellow-workmen; their life might be ignoble, but it had abundance of enjoyment. To him there came no joy, nor ever would. Only when he lay in his last sleep would it truly be said of him that he rested.

At twelve o'clock he rose; he had no longing for sleep, but in five hours the new week would have begun, and he must face it with what bodily strength he might. Before entering his bedroom, which was next to the parlour, he went to the house-door and opened it quietly. A soft rain was falling. Leaving the door ajar, he stepped out into the street and looked up to the top windows. There was no light behind the blinds. As if satisfied, he went hack into the house and to his room.

The factory was at so short a distance from Walnut Tree Walk that Gilbert was able to come home for breakfast and dinner. When he entered at mid-day on Monday, his mother pointed to a letter on the mantel-piece. He examined the address, and was at a loss to recognise the writing.

'Who's this from, I wonder?' he said, as he opened the envelope.

He found a short letter, and a printed slip which looked like a circular. The former ran thus:

> 'Sir,—I am about to deliver a course of evening lectures on a period of English Literature in a room which I have taken for the purpose, No.—High Street, Lambeth. I desire to have a small audience, not more than twenty, consisting of working men who belong to Lambeth. Attendance will be at my invitation, of course without any kind of charge. You have been mentioned to me as one likely to be interested in the subject I propose to deal with. I permit myself to send you a printed syllabus of the course, and to say that it will give me great pleasure if you are able to attend. I should like to arrange for two lectures weekly, each of an hour's duration; the days I leave undecided, also the hour, as I wish to adapt these to the convenience of my hearers. If you feel inclined to give thought to the matter, will you meet me at the lecture-room at eight o'clock on the evening of Sunday, August 16, when we could discuss details? The lectures themselves had better, I should think, begin with the month of September.
>
> 'Reply to this is unnecessary; I hope to have the pleasure of meeting you on the 16th.—Believe me to be yours very truly,
> *'WALTER EGREMONT.'*

'Ah, this is what Ackroyd was speaking of on Saturday,' Gilbert remarked, holding the letter to his mother. 'I wonder what it means.'

'Who is this Mr. Egremont?' asked Mrs. Grail.

'He belongs to the firm of Egremont & Pollard, so Ackroyd tells me. You know that big factory in Westminster Bridge Road—where they make oil-cloth.'

Gilbert was perusing the printed syllabus; it interested him, and he kept it by his plate when he sat down to dinner.

'Do you think of going?' his mother inquired.

'Well, I should like to, if the lectures are good. I suppose he's a young fellow fresh from college. He may have something to say, and he may be only conceited; there's no knowing. Still, I don't dislike the way he writes. Yes, I think I shall go and have a look at him, at all events.'

Gilbert finished his meal and walked back to the factory. Groups of men were standing about in the sunshine, waiting for the bell to ring; some talked and joked, some amused themselves with horse-play. The narrow street was redolent with oleaginous matter; the clothing of the men was penetrated with the same nauseous odour.

At a little distance from the factory, Ackroyd was sitting on a door-step, smoking a pipe. Grail took a seat beside him and drew from his pocket the letter he had just received.

'I've got one of them, too,' Luke observed with small show of interest. There was an unaccustomed gloom on his face; he puffed at his pipe rather sullenly.

'Who has told him our names and addresses?' Gilbert asked.

'Bower, no doubt.'

'But how comes Bower to know anything about me?'

'Oh, I've mentioned you sometimes.'

'Well, do you think of going?'

'No, I shan't go. It isn't at all in my line.'

Gilbert became silent.

'Something the matter?' he asked presently, as his companion puffed on in the same gloomy way.

'A bit of a headache, that's all.'

His tone was unusual. Gilbert fixed his eyes on the pavement.

'It's easy enough to see what it means,' Ackroyd continued after a moment, referring to Egremont's invitation. 'We shall be having an election before long, and he's going to stand for Vauxhall. This is one way of making himself known.'

'If I thought that,' said the other, musingly, 'I shouldn't go near the place.'

'What else can it be?'

'I don't know anything about the man, but he may have an idea that he's doing good.'

'If so, *that's* quite enough to prevent me from going. What the devil do I want with his help? Can't I read about English literature for myself?'

'Well, I can't say that I have that feeling. A lecture may be a good deal of use, if the man knows his subject well. But,' he added, smiling, 'I suppose you object to him and his position?'

'Of course I do. What business has the fellow to have so much time that he doesn't know what to do with it?'

'He might use it worse, anyhow.'

'I don't know about that. I'd rather he'd get a bad name, then it 'ud be easier to abuse him, and he'd be more good in the end.'

Their eyes met. Gilbert's had a humorous expression, and Ackroyd laughed in an unmirthful way. The factory bell rang; Gilbert rose and waited for the other to accompany him. But Luke, after a struggle to his feet, said suddenly:

'Work be hanged! I've had enough of it; I feel Mondayish, as we used to say in Lancashire.'

'Aren't you coming, then?'

'No, I'll go and get drunk instead.'

'Come on, old man. No good in getting drunk,'

'Maybe I won't but I can't go back to work to-day. So long!'

With which vernacular leave-taking, he turned and strolled away. The bell was clanging its last strokes; Gilbert hurried to the door, and once more merged his humanity in the wage-earning machine.

Two days later, as he sat over his evening meal, Gilbert noticed that his mother had something to say. She cast frequent glances at him; her pursed lips seemed to await an opportune moment.

'Well, mother, what is it?' he said presently, with his wonted look of kindness. By living so long together and in such close intercourse the two had grown skilled in the reading of each other's faces.

'My dear,' she replied, with something of solemnity, 'I was perfectly right. Miss Denny *was* those girls' mother.'

'Nonsense!'

'But there's no doubt about it. I've asked Thyrza. She knows that was her mother's name, and she knows that her mother was a teacher.'

'In that case I've nothing more to say. You're a wonderful old lady, as I've often told you.'

'I have a good memory, Gilbert. You can't think how pleased I am that I found out that. I feel more interest in them than ever. And the child seemed so pleased too! She could scarcely believe that I'd known her mother before she was born. She wants me to tell her and her sister all I can remember. Now, isn't it nice?'

Gilbert smiled, but made no further remark. The evening silence set in.

CHAPTER VII
THE WORK IN PROGRESS

On the sheltered side of Eastbourne, just at the springing of the downs as you climb towards Beachy Head, is a spacious and heavy-looking stone house, with pillared porch, oriel windows on the ground floor of the front, and a square turret rising above the fine row of chestnuts which flanks the road. It was built some forty years ago, its only neighbours then being a few rustic cottages; recently there has sprung up a suburb of comely red-brick houses, linking it with the visitors' quarter of Eastbourne. The builder and first proprietor, a gentleman whose dignity derived from Mark Lane, called the house Odessa Lodge; at his death it passed by purchase into the hands of people to whom this name seemed something worse than inappropriate, and the abode was henceforth known as The Chestnuts.

One morning early in November, three months after the date of that letter which he addressed to Gilbert Grail and other working men of Lambeth, our friend Egremont arrived from town at Eastbourne station and was conveyed thence by fly to the house of which I speak. He inquired for Mrs. Ormonde. That lady was not within, but would shortly return from her morning drive. Egremont followed the servant to the library and prepared to wait.

The room was handsomely furnished and more than passably supplied with books, which inspection showed to be not only such as one expects to find in the library of a country house, but to a great extent works of very modern issue, arguing in their possessor the catholicity of taste which our time encourages. The solid books which form the substratum of every collection were brought together by Mr. Brook Ormonde, in the first instance at his house in Devonshire Square; when failing health compelled him to leave London, the town establishment was broken up, and until his death, three years later, the family resided wholly at The Chestnuts. During those years the library grew appreciably, for the son of the house, Horace Ormonde, had just come forth from the academic curriculum with a vast appetite for literature. His mother, moreover, was of the women who read. Whilst Mr. Ormonde was taking a lingering farewell of the world and its concerns, these two active minds were busy with the fire-new thought of the scientific and humanitarian age. Walter Egremont was then a frequent visitor of the house; he and Horace talked many a summer night into dawn over the problems which nowadays succeed measles and scarlatina as a form of youthful complaint. But Horace Ormonde had even a shorter span of life before him than his invalid father. He was drowned in bathing, and it was Egremont who had to take the news up to The Chestnuts. A few months later, there was another funeral from the house. Mrs. Ormonde remained alone.

It was in this room that Egremont had waited for the mother's coming, that morning when he returned companionless from the beach. He was then but two-and-twenty; big task was as terrible as a man can be called upon to perform. Mrs. Ormonde had the strength to remember that; she shed no tears, uttered no lamentations. When, after a few questions, she was going silently from the room, Walter, his own eyes blinded, caught her hand and pressed it passionately in both his own. She was the woman whom he reverenced above all others, worshipping her with that pure devotion which young men such as he are wont to feel for some gracious lady much their elder. At that moment he would have given his own life to the sea could he by so doing have brought her back the son who would never return. Such moments do not come often to the best of us, perhaps in very truth do not repeat themselves. Egremont never entered the library without having that impulse of uttermost unselfishness brought back vividly to his thoughts; on that account he liked the room, and gladly spent a quiet half-hour in it.

In a little less than that Mrs. Ormonde returned from her breathing of the sea air. At the door she was told of Egremont's arrival, and with a look of pleased expectancy she went at once to the library.

Egremont rose from the fireside, and advanced with the quiet confidence with which one greets only the dearest friends.

'So the sunshine has brought you,' she said, holding his hand for a moment. 'We had a terrible storm in the night, and the morning is very sweet after it. Had you arrived a very little sooner, you would have been in time to drive with me.'

She was one of those women who have no need to soften their voice when they would express kindness. Her clear and firm, yet sweet, tones uttered with perfection a nature very richly and tenderly endowed. During the past five years she had aged in appearance; the grief which she would not expose had drawn its lines upon her features, and something too of imperfect health was visible there. But her gaze was the same as ever, large, benevolent, intellectual. In her presence Egremont always felt a well-being, a peace of mind, which gave to his own look its pleasantest quality. Of friends she was still, and would ever be, the dearest to him. The thought of her approval was always active with him when he made plans for fruitful work; he could not have come before her with a consciousness of ignoble fault weighing upon his mind.

She passed upstairs, and he followed more slowly. Behind the first landing was a small conservatory; and there, amid evergreens, sat two children whose appearance would have surprised a chance visitor knowing nothing of the house and its mistress. They obviously came from some very poor working-class home; their clothing was of the plainest possible, and, save that they were very clean and in perfect order, they might have been sitting on a doorstep in a London back street. Mrs. Ormonde had thrown a kind word to them in hurrying by. At the sight of Egremont they hushed their renewed talk and turned shamefaced looks to the ground. He went on to the drawing-room, where there was the same comfort and elegance as in the library. Almost immediately Mrs. Ormonde joined him.

'So you want news!' she said, with her own smile, always a little sad, always mingling tenderness with reserve on the firm lips. 'Really, I told you everything essential in my letter. Annabel is in admirable health, both of body and mind. She is deep in Virgil and Dante—what more could you wish her? Her father, I am sorry to say, is not altogether well. Indeed, I was guilty of doing my best to get him to London for the winter.'

'Ah! That is something of which your letter made no mention.'

'No, for I didn't succeed. At least, he shook his head very persistently.'

'I heartily wish you had succeeded. Couldn't you get help from Annabel—Miss Newthorpe?'

'Never mind; let it be Annabel between us,' said Mrs. Ormonde, seating herself near the fire. 'I tried to, but she was not fervent. All the same, it is just possible, I think, that they may come. Mr. Newthorpe needs society, however content he may believe himself. Annabel, to my surprise, does really seem independent of such aids. How wonderfully she has grown since I saw her two years ago! No, no, I don't mean physically—though that is also true—but how her mind has grown! Even her letters hadn't quite prepared me for what I found.'

Egremont was leaning on the back of a chair, his hands folded together. He kept silence, and Mrs. Ormonde, with a glance at him, added:

'But she is something less than human at present. Probably that will last for another year or so.'

'Less than human?'

'Abstract, impersonal. With the exception of her father, you were the only living person of whom she voluntarily spoke to me.'

'She spoke of me?'

'Very naturally. Your accounts of Lambeth affair interest her deeply, though again in rather too—what shall we call it?—too theoretical a way. But that comes of her inexperience.'

'Still she at least speaks of me.'

Mrs. Ormonde could have made a discouraging rejoinder. She said nothing for a moment, her eyes fixed on the fire. Then:

'But now for your own news.'

'What I have is unsatisfactory. A week ago the class suffered a secession. You remember my description of Ackroyd?'

'Ackroyd? The young man of critical aspect?'

'The same. He has now missed two lectures, and I don't think he'll come again.'

'Have you spoken to Bower about him?'

'No. The fact is, my impressions of Bower have continued to grow unfavourable. Plainly, he cares next to nothing for the lectures. There is a curious pomposity about him, too, which grates upon me. I shouldn't have been at all sorry if he had been the seceder; he's bored terribly, I know, yet he naturally feels bound to keep his place. But I'm very sorry that Ackroyd has gone; he has brains, and I wanted to get to know him. I shall not give him up; I must persuade him to come and have a talk with me.'

'What of Mr. Grail?'

'Ah, Grail is faithful. Yes, Grail is the man of them all; that I am sure of. I am going to ask him to stay after the lecture to-morrow. I haven't spoken privately with him yet. But I think I can begin now to establish nearer relations with two or three of them. I have been lecturing for just a couple of months; they ought to know something of me by this time, On the whole, I think I am succeeding. But if there is one of them on whom I found great hopes, it is Grail. The first time I saw him, I knew what a distinction there was between him and the others. He seems to be a friend of Ackroyd's, too; I must try to get at Ackroyd by means of him.'

'Is he—Grail, I mean—a married man?'

'I really don't know. Yet I should think so. I shouldn't be surprised if he were unhappily married. Certainly there is some great trouble in his life. Sometimes he looks terribly worn, quite ill.'

'And Mr. Bunce?' she asked, with a look of peculiar interest.

'Poor Bunce is also a good deal of a mystery to me. He, too, always looks more or less miserable, and I'm afraid his interest is not very absorbing. Still, he takes notes, and now and then even puts an intelligent question.'

'He has not attacked you on the subject of religion yet.

'Oh, no! We still have that question to fight out. But of course I must know him very well before I approach it. I think he bears me goodwill; I caught him looking at me with a curious sort of cordiality the other night.'

'I must have that little girl of his down again,' Mrs. Ormonde said. 'I wonder whether she still reads that insufferable publication. By-the-by, I found you had told them the story at Ullswater.'

'Yes. It came up *a propos* of my scheme.'

A gong sounded down below.

'Twelve o'clock' remarked Mrs. Ormonde. 'My birds are going to their dinner—poor little town sparrows! We'll let them get settled, then go and have a peep at them—shall we?'

'Yes, I should like to see them—and,' he added pleasantly, 'to see the look on your face when you watch them.'

'I have much to thank them for, Walter,' she said, earnestly. 'They brighten many an hour when I should be unhappy.'

Presently Mrs. Ormonde led the way downstairs and to the rear of the house. A room formerly devoted to billiards had been converted into a homely but very bright refectory; it was hung round with cheerful pictures, and before each of the two windows stood a large aquarium, full of water-plants and fishes. At the table were seated seven little girls, of ages from eight to thirteen, all poorly clad, yet all looking remarkably joyous, and eating with much evidence of appetite. At the head of the table was a woman of middle age and motherly aspect—Mrs. Mapper. She had the superintendence of the convalescents whom the lady of the house received and sent back to their homes in London better physically and morally than they had ever been in their lives before. The children did not notice

that Mrs. Ormonde and her companion had entered; they were chatting gaily over their meal. Now and then one of them drew a gentle word of correction from Mrs. Mapper, but on the whole they needed no rebuke. Those who had been longest in the house speedily instructed new arrivals in the behaviour they had learned to deem becoming. A girl waited at table. On that subject Mrs. Ormonde had amusing stories to relate; how more than one servant had regretfully but firmly declined to wait upon little ragamuffins (female, too), and how one in particular had explained that she made no objection to doing it only because she regarded it as a religious penance.

Egremont had his pleasure in regarding her face, nobly beautiful as she moved her eyes from one to another of her poor little pensioners. She had said at first that it would be impossible ever again to live in this house, when she quitted it for a time after her husband's death. How could she pass through the barren rooms, how dwell within sight and sound of the treacherous waves which had taken her dearest? It was a royal thought which converted the sad dwelling into a home for those whose reawakening laughter would chide despondency from beneath the roof; whose happiness would ease the heavy heart and make memory a sacred solace. She had her abounding reward, and such as only the greatly loving may attain to.

They withdrew without having excited attention; Mrs. Mapper saw them, but Mrs. Ormonde made sign to her to say nothing.

'Two are upstairs, I'm sorry to say,' she remarked as they went back to the drawing-room. 'They have obstinate colds; I keep them under the bed-clothes. The difficulty these poor things have in getting rid of a cold! With many of them I believe such a condition is chronic; it goes on, I suppose, until they die of it.'

They talked together till luncheon time. Egremont led the conversation back to Ullswater, where Mrs. Ormonde had just spent a fortnight.

'I think I must go and see them at Christmas,' he said, 'if they don't come south.'

The other considered.

'Don't go so soon,' she said at length.

'So soon? It will be six mortal months.'

'Be advised.'

Egremont sighed and left the subject.

'Tell me what you have been doing of late,' Mrs. Ormonde resumed, 'apart from your lectures.'

'Very little of which any account can be rendered. I read a good deal, and occasionally come across an acquaintance.'

'Have you seen the Tyrrells since they returned?'

'No. I had an invitation to dine with them the other day, but excused myself.'

'On what grounds?'

'I mean to see less of people in general.'

Mrs. Ormonde regarded him.

'I hope,' she said, 'that you will pursue no such idea. You mean, of course, that your Lambeth work is to be absorbing. Let it be so, but don't fall into the mistake of making it your burden. You are not one of those who can work in solitude.'

'I am getting a distaste for ordinary society.'

'Then I beg of you to resist the mood. Go into society freely. You are in danger as soon as you begin to neglect it.'

'I, individually?'

'Yes.' She smiled at the deprecating look he turned on her. 'Let me be your moral physician. Already I notice that you fall short of perfect health: the refusal of that invitation is a symptom. Pray give faith to what I say; if any one knows you, I think it is I.'

He kept silence. Mrs. Ormonde continued:

'I hear that the Tyrrells have made the acquaintance of Mr. Dalmaine. Paula mentions him in a letter.'

'Ha! With enthusiasm probably?'

'No. They met him somewhere in Switzerland. He gave them the benefit of his experience on the education question.'

'Of course. Well, I am prejudiced against the man, as you know.'

'He is a force. It looks as if we should hear a good deal of him in the future.'

'Doubtless. The incarnate ideal of British philistinism is sure to have a career before him.'

The lady laughed.

Early in the afternoon Egremont took leave of his friend and returned to London. It was his habit when in England, to run down to Eastbourne in this way about once a month.

Since the death of his father, his home had been represented by rooms in Great Russell Street. He chose them on account of their proximity to the British Museum; at that time he believed himself destined to produce some monumental work of erudition: the subject had not defined itself, but his thoughts were then busy with the origins of Christianity, and it seemed to him that a study of certain Oriental literatures would be fruitful of results. Characteristically, he must establish himself at the very doors of the great Library. His Oriental researches, as we know, were speedily abandoned, but the rooms in Great Russell Street still kept their tenant. They were far from an ideal abode, indifferently furnished, with draughty doors and smoky chimneys, and the rent was exorbitant; the landlady, who speedily gauged her lodger's character, had already made a small competency out of him. Even during long absences abroad Egremont retained the domicile; at each return he said to himself that he must really find quarters at once more reputable and more homelike, but the thought of removing his books, of dealing with new people, deterred him from the actual step. In fact, was indifferent as to where or how he lived; all he asked was the possibility of privacy. The ugliness of his surroundings did not trouble him, for he paid no attention to them. Some day he would have a beautiful home, but what use in thinking of that till he had someone to share it with him? This was a mere *pied a terre*; it housed his body and left his mind free.

The real home which he remembered was a house looking upon Clapham Common. His father dwelt there for the last fifteen years of his life; his mother died there, shortly after the removal from the small house in Newington where she went to live upon her marriage. With much tenderness Egremont thought of the clear-headed and warm-hearted man whose life-long toil had made such provision for the son he loved. Uneducated, homely, narrow enough in much of his thinking, the manufacturer of oil-cloth must have had singular possibilities in his nature to renew himself in a youth so apt for modern culture as Walter was; thinking back in his maturity, the latter remembered many a noteworthy trait in his father, and wished the old man could have lived yet a few more years to see his son's work really beginning. And Egremont often felt lonely. Possibly he had relatives living, but he knew of none; in any case they could not now be of real account to him. The country of his birth was far behind him; how far, he had recognised since he began his lecturing in Lambeth. None the less, he at times knew home-sickness: not seldom there seemed to be a gap between him and the people born to refinement who were his associates, his friends. That phase of feeling was rather strong in him just now; disguising itself in the form of sundry plausible motives, it had induced him to decline Mrs. Tyrrell's invitation, and was fostering his temporary distaste for the society in which he had always found much pleasure. What if in strictness he belonged to neither sphere? What if his life were to be a struggle between inherited sympathies and the affinities of his intellect? All the better, perchance, for his prospect of usefulness; he stood as a mediator between two sections of society. But for his private happiness, how?

He spent this evening very idly, sometimes pacing his large, uncomfortable room, sometimes endeavouring to read one or other of certain volumes new from the circulating library. Of late he had passed many such evenings, for it was very seldom that any one came to see him, and for the

amusements of the town he had no inclination. He was thinking much of Annabel; he could not imagine her other than calm, intellectual; he could not hear her voice uttering passionate words. A great change must come over her before her reserved maidenliness could soften to such sweet humility.

And he had no faith in his power so to change her.

The next day was Thursday. This and Sunday were his lecture days; his class met at half-past eight. Precisely at that hour he reached a small doorway in High Street, Lambeth, and ascended a flight of stairs to a room which he had furnished as he deemed most suitable. Several rows of school-desks faced a high desk at which he stood to lecture. The walls were washed in distemper, the boarding of the floor was uncovered, the two windows were hidden with plain shutters. The room had formerly been used for purposes of storage by a glass and china merchant; below was the workshop of a saddler, which explained the pervading odour of leather.

A little group of men stood in conversation near the fire; on Egremont's appearance they seated themselves at the desks, each producing a note-book which he laid open before him. Thus ranged they were seen to be eight in number. Out of fourteen to whom invitations were addressed, nine had presented themselves at the preliminary meeting; one, we know, had since proved unfaithful. Egremont looked round for Ackroyd on entering, but the young man was not here.

On the front bench were two men whom as yet you know only by name. Mr. Bower was clearly distinguishable by his personal importance and the *ennui*, not to be disguised, with which he listened to the opening sentences of the lecture. He leaned against the desk behind him, and carefully sharpened the point of his pencil. He was a large man with a spade-shaped beard; his forehead was narrow, and owed its appearance of height to incipient baldness; his eyes were small and shrewd. He habitually donned his suit of black for these meetings. At the works, where he held a foreman's position, he was in good repute: for years he had proved himself skilful, steady, abundantly respectful to his employers. In private life he enjoyed the fame of a petty capitalist; since his marriage, thirty years ago, he and his wife had made it the end of their existence to put by money, with the result that his obsequiousness when at work was balanced by the blustering independence of his leisure hours. The man was a fair instance of the way in which prosperity affects the average proletarian; all his better qualities—honesty, perseverance, sobriety—took an ignoble colour from the essential vulgarity of his nature, which would never have so offensively declared itself if ill fortune had kept him anxious about his daily bread. Formerly Egremont had been impressed by his intelligent manner; closer observation had proved to him of how little worth this intelligence was, in its subordination to a paltry character. Bower regarded himself as the originator of this course of lectures; through all his obsequiousness it was easy to see that he deemed his co-operation indispensable to the success of the project. At first, as was natural, Egremont had sometimes seemed to address words specially to him; of late he had purposely avoided doing so, and Bower began to feel that his services lacked recognition.

The other, of whom there has been casual mention, was Joseph Bunce. Of spare frame and with hollow cheeks which suggested insufficiency of diet, he yet had far more of manliness in his appearance than the portly Bower. You divined in him independence enough, and of worthier origin than that which secretly inflated his neighbour. His features were at first sight by no means pleasing; their coarseness was undeniable, but familiarity revealed a sensitive significance in the irregular nose, the prominent lips, the small chin and long throat. Egremont had now and then caught a light in his eyes which was warranty for more than his rough tongue could shape into words. He often appeared to have a difficulty in following the lecture; would shrug nervously, and knit his brows and mutter. Whenever he noticed that, Egremont would pause a little and repeat in simpler form what he had been saying, with the satisfactory result that Bunce showed a clearer face and jotted something on his dirty note-book with his stumpy pencil.

Gilbert Grail we know. It was impossible not to remark him as the one who followed with most consecutive understanding, even if his countenance had not declared him of higher grade than any of those among whom he sat. It had needed only the first ten minutes of the first lecture to put him at his ease with regard to Egremont's claims to stand forward as a teacher; the preliminary meeting, indeed, had removed the suspicions suggested by Ackroyd. To him these evenings were pure enjoyment. He delighted in this subject, and had an inexpressible pleasure in listening continuously to the speech of a cultivated man. Had the note-books of the class been examined (Egremont had strongly advised their use), Gilbert's jottings would probably have alone been found of substantial value, seeing that he alone possessed the mental habit necessary for the practice. Bunce's would doubtless have come next, though at a long distance; a Carlylean editor might have disengaged from them many a rudely forcible scrap of comment. Bower's pages would have smelt of the day-book. It was to Grail that Egremont mentally directed the best things he had to say; not seldom he was repaid by the quick gleam of sympathy on that grave interesting face.

The remaining five hearers were average artisans of the inquiring type; they followed with perseverance, though at times one or the other would furtively regard his watch or allow his eyes to stray about the room. They had made a bargain, and were bent on honourably carrying out their share in it. But Egremont already began to doubt whether he was really fixing anything in their thoughts. How were they likely to serve him for the greater purpose whereto this instruction was only preliminary? When he looked forward to that, he had to fix his eyes on Grail and forget the others. He was beginning to regret that the choice of those to whom his invitations were sent had depended upon Bower; another man might have aided him more effectually. Yet the fact was that Bower's selection had been a remarkably good one. It would have been difficult to assemble nine Lambeth workmen of higher aggregate intellect than those who responded to the summons; it would have been, on the other hand, the easiest thing to find nine with not a man of them available for anything more than futile wrangling over politics or religion. Egremont would know this some day; he was yet young in social reform.

And the lectures? It is not too much to say that they were good. Egremont had capacity for teaching; with his education, had he been without resources, he would probably have chosen an academic career, and have done service in it. There was nothing deep in his style of narrative and criticism, and here depth was not wanted; sufficient that he was perspicuous and energetic. He loved the things of which he spoke, and he had the power of presenting to others his reason for loving them. Not one in five hundred men inexperienced in such work could have held the ears of the class as he did for the first two or three evenings. It was impossible for them to mistake his spirit—ardent, disinterested, aspiring—impossible not to feel something of a respondent impulse. That familiarity should diminish the effect of his speech was only to be anticipated. He was preaching a religion, but one that could find no acceptance as such with eight out of nine who heard him. Common minds are not kept at high-interest mark for long together by exhibition of the merely beautiful, however persuasively it be set forth.

He had chosen the Elizabethan period, and he led up to it by the kind of introduction which he felt would be necessary. Trusting himself more after the first fortnight, he ceased to write out his lectures verbatim; free utterance was an advantage to himself and his audience. He read at large from his authors; to expect the men to do this for themselves—even had the books been within their reach—would have been too much, and without such illustration the lectures were vain. This reading brought him face to face with his main difficulty: how to create in men a sense which they do not possess. The working man does not read, in the strict sense of the word; fiction has little interest for him, and of poetry he has no comprehension whatever; your artisan of brains can study, but he cannot read. Egremont was under no illusion on this point; he knew well that the loveliest lyric would appeal to a man like Bower no more than an unintelligible demonstration of science. Was it impossible to bestow this sense of intellectual beauty? With what earnestness he made the endeavour!

He took sweet passages of prose and verse, and read them with all the feeling and skill he could command. 'Do you yield to that?' he said within himself as he looked from face to face. 'Are your ears hopelessly sealed, your minds immutably earthen?' Grail—Oh yes, Grail had the right intelligence in his eyes; but Ackroyd, but Bunce? Ackroyd thought of the meaning of the words; no more. Poor Bunce had darkling throes of mind, but struggled with desperate nervousness and could not be at ease till the straightforward talk began again. And Bower?—Nay, there goes more to this matter than mere enthusiasm in a teacher. Who had instructed Gilbert Grail to discern the grace of the written word? On the other hand, it was doubtful whether Walter Egremont, left to himself in the home of his good plain father, would have felt what now he did. The soil was there, but how much do we not owe to tillage. Read what Egremont on one occasion read to these men:

'"He beginneth not with obscure definitions, which must blur the margins with interpretations and load the memory with doubtfulness: but he cometh to you with words set in delightful proportion, either accompanied with or prepared for the well-enchanting skill of music and with a tale forsooth he cometh unto you—with a tale which holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney-corner."'

What were *that* to you, save for the glow of memory fed with incense of the poets?—save for innumerable dear associations, only possible to the instructed, which make the finer part of your intellectual being? Walter was attempting too much, and soon became painfully conscious of it.

He came to the dramatists, and human interest thenceforth helped him. He could read well, and a scene from those giants of the prime had efficiency even with Bower. Hope revived in the lecturer.

To-night he was less happy than usual, for what reason he could not himself understand. His thoughts wandered, sometimes to Eastbourne, sometimes to Ullswater; yet he was speaking of Shakespeare. Bower was more owl-eyed than usual; the five doubtful hearers obviously felt the time long. Only Grail gave an unfailing ear. Egremont closed with a sense of depression.

Would Bower come and pester him with fatuous questions and remarks? No; Bower turned away and reached his hat from the peg. The doubtful five took down their hats and followed the portly man from the room. Bunce was talking with Grail, pointing with dirty forefinger to something in his dirty note-book. But he, too, speedily moved to the hat-pegs. Grail was also going, when Egremont said:

'Could you spare me five minutes, Mr. Grail; I should like to speak to you.'

CHAPTER VIII
A CLASP OF HANDS

Grail approached the desk with pleasure. Egremont observed it, and met his trusty auditor with the eye-smile which made his face so agreeable.

'I am sorry to see that Mr. Ackroyd no longer sits by you,' he began. 'Has he deserted us?'

Gilbert hesitated, but spoke at length with his natural directness.

'I'm afraid so, sir.'

'He has lost his interest in the subject?'

'It's not exactly the bent of his mind. He only came at my persuasion to begin with. He takes more to science than literature.'

'Ah, I should have thought that. But I wish he could have still spared me the two hours a week. I felt much interest in him; it's a disappointment to lose him so unexpectedly. I'm sure he has a head for our matters as well as for science.'

Grail was about to speak, but checked himself. An inquiring glance persuaded him to say:

'He's much taken up with politics just now. They don't leave the mind very quiet.'

'Politics? I regret more than ever that he's gone.'

Egremont moved away from the desk at which he had been standing, and seated himself on the end of a bench which came out opposite the fire-place.

'Come and sit down for a minute, will you, Mr. Grail?' he said.

Gilbert silently took possession of the end of the next bench.

'Is there no persuading him back? Do you think he would come and have a talk with me? I do wish he would; I believe we could understand each other. You see him occasionally?'

'Every day. We work together.'

'Would you ask him to come and have a chat with me here some evening?'

'I shall be glad to, sir.'

'Pray persuade him to. Any evening he likes. Perhaps next Sunday after the lecture would do? Tell him to bring his pipe and have a smoke with me here before the fire.'

Grail smiled, and undertook to deliver the invitation.

'But there are other things I wished to speak of to you,' Egremont continued. 'Do you think it would be any advantage if I brought books for the members of the class to take away and use at their leisure? Shakespeare, of course, you can all lay hands on, but the other Elizabethan authors are not so readily found. For instance, there's a Marlowe on the desk; would you care to take him away with you?'

'Thank you very much, sir,' was the reply, 'but I've got Marlowe. I picked up a second-hand copy a year or two ago.'

'You have him! Ah, that's good!'

Egremont was surprised, but remembered that it would not be very courteous to express such feeling. After surprise came new warmth of interest in the man. He began to speak of Marlowe with delight, and in a moment he and Grail were on a footing of intimacy.

'But there are other books perhaps you haven't come across yet. I shall be overjoyed if you'll let me be of use to you in that way. Have you access to any library?'

'No, I haven't. I've often felt the want of it.'

Egremont fell into musing for a moment. He looked up with an idea in his eyes.

'Wouldn't it be an excellent thing if one could establish a lending library in Lambeth?'

Grail might have excusably replied that it would be a yet more excellent thing if those disposed to use such an institution had time granted them to do so; but with the young man's keen look fixed upon him, he had other thoughts.

'It would be a great thing!' he replied, with subdued feeling. He seldom allowed his stronger emotions to find high utterance; that moderated voice was symbol of the suppression to which his life had trained itself.

'A free library,' Egremont went on, 'with a good reading-room.'

It was an extension of his scheme, and delighted him with its prospect of possibilities. It would be preparing the ground upon which he and his adherents might subsequently work. Could be undertake to found a library at his own expense? It was not beyond his means, at all events a beginning on a moderate scale. His eyes sparkled, as they always did when a thought burst blossom-like within him.

'Mr. Grail, I have a mind to try if I can't work on that idea.'

Gilbert was stirred. This interchange of words had strengthened his personal liking for Egremont, and his own idealism took fire from that of the other. He regarded the young man with admiration and with noble envy. To be able to devise such things and straightway say 'It shall be done!' How blest beyond all utterance was the man to whom fortune had given such power! He reverenced Egremont profoundly. It was the man's nature to worship, to bend with singleness of heart before whatsoever seemed to him high and beautiful.

'Yes,' the latter continued, 'I will think it out. We might begin with a moderate supply of books; we might find some building that would do at first; a real library could be built when the people had begun to appreciate what was offered them. Better, no doubt, if they would tax themselves for the purpose, but they have burdens enough.'

'They won't give a farthing towards a library,' said Grail, 'until they know its value; and that they can't do until they have learnt it from books.'

'True. We'll break the circle.'

He pondered again, then added cheerfully:

'I say *we*. I mean you and the others who come to my lecture. I want, if possible, to make this class permanent, to make it the beginning of a society for purposes I have in my mind. I must tell you something of this, for I know you will feel with me, Mr. Grail.'

The reply was a look of quiet trust. Egremont had not thought to get so far as this to-night, but Grail's personality wrought upon him, even as his on Grail. He felt a desire to open his mind, as he had done that evening in the garden by Ullswater. This man was of those whom he would benefit, but, if he mistook not, far unlike the crowd; Grail could understand as few of his class could be expected to.

'To form a society, a club, let us say. Not at all like the ordinary clubs. There are plenty of places where men can meet to talk about what ought to be done for the working class; my idea is to bring the working class to talk of what it can do for itself. And not how it can claim its material rights, how to get better wages, shorter hours, more decent homes. With all those demands I sympathise as thoroughly as any man; but those things are coming, and it seems to me that it's time to ask what working men are going to do with such advantages when they've got them. Now, my hope is to get a few men to see—what you, I know, see clearly enough—that life, to be worthy of the name, must be first and foremost concerned with the things of the heart and mind. Yet everything in our time favours the opposite. The struggle for existence is so hard that we grow more and more material: the tendency is to regard it as the end of life to make money. If there's time to think of higher things, well and good; if not, it doesn't matter much. Well, we have to earn money; it is a necessary evil; but let us think as little about it as we may. Our social state, in short, has converted the means of life into its end.'

He paused, and Gilbert looked hearty agreement.

'That puts into a sentence,' he said, 'what I have thought through many an hour of work.'

'Well, now, we know there's no lack of schemes for reforming society. Most of them seek to change its spirit by change of institutions. But surely it is plain enough that reform of institutions can only come as the natural result of a change in men's minds. Those who preach revolution to the disinherited masses give no thought to this. It's a hard and a bad thing to live under an oppressive

system; don't think that I speak lightly of the miseries which must drive many a man to frenzy, till he heeds nothing so long as the present curse is attacked. I know perfectly well that for thousands of the poorest there is no possibility of a life guided by thought and feeling of a higher kind until they are lifted out of the mire. But if one faces the question with a grave purpose of doing good that will endure, practical considerations must outweigh one's anger. There is no way of lifting those poor people out of the mire; if their children's children tread on firm ground it will be the most we can hope for. But there is a class of working people that can and should aim at a state of mind far above that which now contents them. It is my view that our only hope of social progress lies in the possibility of this class being stirred to effort. The tendency of their present education—a misapplication of the word—must be counteracted. They must be taught to value supremely quite other attainments than those which help them to earn higher wages. Well, there is my thought. I wish to communicate it to men who have a care for more than food and clothing, and who will exert themselves to influence those about them.'

Grail gazed at the fire; the earnest words wrought in him.

'If that were possible!' he murmured.

'Tell me,' the other resumed, quickly, 'how many of the serious people whom you know in Lambeth ever go to a place of worship?'

Gilbert turned his eyes inquiringly, suspiciously. Was Egremont about to preach a pietistic revival?

'I have very few acquaintances,' he answered, 'but I know that religion has no hold upon intelligent working men in London.'

'That is the admission I wanted. For good or for evil, it has passed; no one will ever restore it. And yet it is a religious spirit that we must seek to revive. Dogma will no longer help us. Pure love of moral and intellectual beauty must take its place.'

Gilbert smiled at a thought which came to him.

'The working man's Bible,' he said, 'is his Sunday newspaper.'

'And what does he get out of it? The newspaper is the very voice of all that is worst in our civilisation. If ever there is in one column a pretence of higher teaching, it is made laughable by the base tendency of all the rest. The newspaper has supplanted the book; every gross-minded scribbler who gets a square inch of space in the morning journal has a more respectful hearing than Shakespeare. These writers are tradesmen, and with all their power they cry up the spirit of trade. Till the influence of the newspaper declines—the newspaper as we now know it—our state will grow worse.

Grail was silent. Egremont had worked himself to a fervour which showed itself in his unsteady hands and tremulous lips.

'I had not meant to speak of this yet,' he continued. 'I hoped to surround myself with a few friends who would gradually get to know my views, and perhaps think they were worth something. I have obeyed an impulse in opening my mind to you; I feel that you think with me. Will you join me as a friend, and work on with me for the founding of such a society as I have described?'

'I will, Mr. Egremont,' was the clear-voiced answer.

Walter put forth his hand, and it was grasped firmly. In this moment he was equal to his ambition, unwavering, exalted, the pure idealist. Grail, too, forgot his private troubles, and tasted the strong air of the heights which it is granted us so seldom and for so brief a season to tread. There was almost colour in his cheeks, and his deep-set eyes had a light as of dawn.

'We have much yet to talk of,' said Egremont, as he rose, 'but it gets late and I mustn't keep you longer. Will you come here some evening when there is no lecture and let us turn over our ideas together? I shall begin at once to think of the library. It will make a centre for us, won't it? And remember Ackroyd. You are intimate with him?'

'We think very differently of many things,' said Grail, 'but I like him. We work together.'

'We mustn't lose him. He has the bright look of a man who could do much if he were really moved. Persuade him to come and see me on Sunday night.'

They shook hands again, and Grail took his departure. Egremont still stood for a few minutes before the fire; then he extinguished the gas, locked the door behind him, and went forth into the street singing to himself.

Gilbert turned into Paradise Street, which was close at hand. He had decided to call and ask for Ackroyd on his way home. The latter had not been at work that day, and was perhaps ailing; for some time he had seemed out of sorts. Intercourse between them was not as constant as formerly. Grail explained this as due to Ackroyd's disturbed mood, another result of which was seen in his ceasing to attend the lecture; yet in Gilbert also there was something which tended to weaken the intimacy. He knew well enough what this was, and strove against it, but not with great success.

Ackroyd lived with his married sister, who let half her house to lodgers. When Gilbert knocked at the door, it was she who opened. Mrs. Poole was a buxom young woman with a complexion which suggested continual activity within range of the kitchen fire; her sleeves were always rolled up to her elbow, and at whatever moment surprised she wore an apron which seemed just washed and ironed. She knew not weariness, nor discomfort, nor discontent, and her flow of words suggested a safety valve letting off superfluous energy.

'That Mr. Grail?' she said, peering out into the darkness. 'You've come to look after that great good-for-nothing of a brother of mine, I'll be bound! Come downstairs, and I'll tell him you're here. You may well wonder what's become of him. Ill! Not he, indeed! No more ill than I am. It's only his laziness. He wants a good shaking, that's about the truth of it, Mr. Grail.'

She led him down into the kitchen. A low clothes-horse, covered with fresh-smelling, gently-steaming linen, stood before a great glowing fire. A baby lay awake in a swinging cot just under the protruding leaf of the table, and a little girl of three was sitting in night-dress and shawl on a stool in a warm corner.

'Yes, you may well stare,' resumed Mrs. Poole, noticing Grail's glance at the children. 'A quarter past ten and neither one of 'em shut an eye yet, nor won't do till their father comes home, not if it's twelve o'clock. You dare to laugh, Miss!' she cried to the little one on the stool, with mock wrath. 'The idea of having to fetch you out o' bed just for peace and quietness. And that young man there'—she pointed to the cradle; 'there's about as much sleep ill him as there is in that eight-day clock! You rascal, you!'

Like her brother, she had the northern accent still lingering in her speech; it suited with her brisk, hearty ways. Whilst speaking, she had partly moved the horse from the fire and placed a round-backed chair for the visitor in a position which would have answered tolerably had she meant to roast him.

'He's in the sulks, that's what he is,' she continued, returning to the subject of Luke. 'I suppose you know all about it, Mr. Grail?'

Gilbert seated himself, and Mrs. Poole, pretending to arrange the linen, stood just before him, with a sly smile.

'I'm not sure that I do,' he replied, avoiding her look.

She lowered her voice.

'The idea of a great lad going on like he does! Why, it's the young lady that lives in your house —Miss Trent, you know, I don't know her myself; no doubt she's wonderful pretty and all the rest of it, but I'm that sick and tired of hearing about her! My husband's out a great deal at night, of course, and Luke comes and sits here hours by the clock, just where you are, right in my way. I don't mean *you're* in my way; I'm talking of times when I'm busy. Well, there he sits; and sometimes he'll be that low it's enough to make a body strangle herself with her apron-string. Other times he'll talk, talk, talk and it's all Thyrza Trent, Thyrza Trent, till the name makes my ears jingle. This afternoon I couldn't put up with it, so I told him he was a great big baby to go on as he does. Then we had some snappy

words, and he went off to his bedroom and wouldn't have any tea. But really and truly, I don't know what'll come to him. He says he'll take to drinking, and he does a deal too much o' that as it is. And to think of him losing days from his work! Now do just tell him not to be a fool, Mr. Grail.'

With difficulty Gilbert found an opportunity to put in a word.

'But is there something wrong between them?' he asked with a forced smile.

'Wrong? Why, doesn't he talk about it to you?'

'No. I used to hear just a word or two, but there's been no mention of her for a long time.'

'You may think yourself lucky then, that's all *I* can say. Why, she wouldn't have anything to say to him. And I don't see what he's got to complain of; he admits she told him from the first she didn't care a bit for him. As if there wasn't plenty of other lasses! Luke was always such a softy about 'em; but I never knew him have such a turn as this. I'll just go and tell him you're here.'

'Perhaps he's gone to bed.'

'Not he. He sits in the cold half the night, just to make people sorry for him. He doesn't get much pity from me, the silly fellow.'

She ran up the stairs. Grail, as soon as she was gone, fell into a reverie. It did not seem a pleasant one.

In a few minutes Mrs. Poole was heard returning; behind her came a heavier foot. Ackroyd certainly looked far from well, but had assumed a gay air, which he exaggerated.

'Come to see if I've hanged myself, old man? Not quite so bad as that yet. I've had the toothache and the headache and Lord knows what. Now I feel hungry; we'll have some supper together. Give me a jug, Maggie, and I'll get some beer.'

'You sit down,' she replied. 'I'll run out and fetch it.'

'Why, what's the good of a jug like that!' he roared, watching her. 'A gallon or so won't be a drop too much for me.'

He flung himself into a chair and stretched his legs.

'Been to the lecture?' he asked, as his sister left the room.

'Yes,' Gilbert replied, his wonted quietness contrasting with the other's noise. 'Mr. Egremont's been asking me about you. He's disappointed that you've left him.'

'Can't help it. I held out as long as I could. It isn't my line. Besides, nothing's my line just now. So you had a talk with him, eh?'

'Yes, a talk I shan't forget. There are not many men like Mr. Egremont.'

Gilbert had it on his lips to speak of the library project, but a doubt as to whether he might not be betraying confidence checked him.

'He wants you to go and see him at the lecture-room,' he continued, 'either on Sunday after the lecture, or any evening that suits you. Will you go?'

Luke shook his head.

'No. What's the good?'

'I wish you would, Ackroyd,' said Gilbert, bending forward and speaking with earnestness. 'You'd be glad of it afterwards. He said I was to ask you to go and have a smoke with him by the fire; you needn't be afraid of a sermon, you see. Besides, you know he isn't that kind of man.'

'No, I shan't go, old man,' returned the other, with resolution. 'I liked his lectures well enough, as far as they went, but they're not the kind of thing to suit me nowadays. If I go and talk to him, I'm bound to go to the lectures. What's the good? What's the good of anything?'

Gilbert became silent. The little girl on the stool, who had been moving restlessly, suddenly said:

'Uncle, take me on your lap.'

'Why, of course I will, little un!' Luke replied with a sudden affectionateness one would not have expected of him. 'Give me a kiss. Who's that sitting there, eh?'

'Dono.'

'Nonsense! Say: Mr. Grail.'

In the midst of this, Mrs. Poole reappeared with the jug foaming.

'Oh, indeed! So *that's* where you are!' she exclaimed with her vivacious emphasis, looking at the child. 'A nice thing for you to be nursed at this hour o' night!—Now just one glass, Mr. Grail. It's a bitter night; just a glass to walk on.'

Gilbert pleased her by drinking what she offered. Ackroyd had recommenced his uproarious mirthfulness.

'I wish you could persuade your brother to go to the lectures again, Mrs. Poole,' said Gilbert. 'He misses a great deal.'

'And he'll miss a good deal more,' she replied, 'if he doesn't soon come to his senses. Nay, it's no good o' me talking! He used to be a sensible lad—that is, he could be if he liked.'

Gilbert gave his hand for leave-taking.

'I still hope you'll go on Sunday night,' he said seriously.

Ackroyd shook his head again, then tossed the child into the air and began singing. He did not offer to accompany Grail up to the door.

CHAPTER IX
A GOLDEN PROSPECT

It wanted a week to Christmas. For many days the weather had been as bad as it can be even in London. Windows glimmered at noon with the sickly ray of gas or lamp; the roads were trodden into viscid foulness; all night the droppings of a pestilent rain were doleful upon the roof, and only the change from a black to a yellow sky told that the sun was risen. No wonder Thyrza was ailing.

It was nothing serious. The inevitable cold had clung to her and become feverish; it was necessary for her to stay at home for a day or two. Lydia made her hours of work as short as possible, hastening to get back to her sister. But fortunately there was a friend always at hand; Mrs. Grail could not have been more anxious about a child of her own. Her attendance was of the kind which inspires trust; Lydia, always fretting herself into the extreme of nervousness if her dear one lost for a day the wonted health, was thankful she had not to depend on Mrs. Jarmey's offices.

Thyrza had spent a day in bed, but could now sit by the fire; her chair came from the Grails' parlour, and was the very one which had always seemed to her so comfortable. Her wish that Lyddy should sit in it had at length been gratified.

It was seven o'clock on Friday evening. The table was drawn near to Thyrza's chair, and Thyrza was engaged in counting out silver coins, which she took from a capacious old purse. Lydia leaned on the table opposite.

'Twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six! I'm sure I saw a very nice overcoat marked twenty-five shillings, not long ago; but we can't buy one without knowing grandad's measure.'

'Oh, but you know it near enough, I think.'

'Near enough! But I want it to look nice. I wonder whether I could take a measure without him knowing it? If I could manage to get behind him and just measure across the shoulders, I think that 'ud do.'

Thyrza laughed.

'Go now. He's sure to be sitting with the Bowers. Take the tape and try.'

'No, I'll take a bit of string; then he wouldn't think anything if he saw it.'

Lydia put on her hat and jacket.

'I'll be back as soon as ever I can. Play with the money like a good baby. You're sure you're quite warm?'

Thyrza was wrapped in a large shawl, which hooded over her head. Lydia had taken incredible pains to stop every possible draught at door and window. A cheerful fire threw its glow upon the invalid's face.

'I'm like a toast. Just look up at the shop next to Mrs. Isaac's, Lyddy. There was a sort of brownish coat, with laps over the pockets; it was hanging just by the door. We must get a few more shillings if it makes all the difference, mustn't we?'

'We'll see. Good-bye, Blue-eyes.'

Lydia went her way. For a wonder, there was no fog tonight, but the street lamps glistened on wet pavements, and vehicles as they rattled along sent mud-volleys to either side. In passing through Lambeth Walk, Lydia stopped at the clothing shop of which Thyrza had spoken. The particular brownish coat had seemingly been carried off by a purchaser, but she was glad to notice one or two second-hand garments of very respectable appearance which came within the sum at her command. She passed on into Paradise Street and entered Mrs. Bower's shop.

In the parlour the portly Mr. Bower stood with his back to the fire; he was speaking oracularly, and, at Lydia's entrance, looked up with some annoyance at being interrupted. Mr. Boddy sat in

his accustomed corner. Mrs. Bower, arrayed in the grandeur suitable to a winter evening, was condescending to sew.

'Mary out?' Lydia asked, as she looked round.

'Yes, my dear,' replied Mrs. Bower, with a sigh of resignation. 'She's at a prayer meetin', as per us'l. That's the third night this blessed week. I 'old with goin' to chapel, but like everything else it ought to be done in moderation. Mary's gettin' beyond everything. I don't believe in makin' such a fuss o' religion; you can be religious in your mind without sayin' prayers an' singin' 'ymns all the week long. There's the Sunday for that, an' I can't see as it's pleasin' to God neither to do so much of it at other times. Now suppose I give somebody credit in the shop, on the understandin' as they come an' pay their bill once a week reg'lar; do you think I should like to have 'em lookin' in two or three times every day an' cryin' out: "Oh, Mrs. Bower, ma'am, I don't forget as I owe you so and so much; be sure I shall come an' pay on Saturday!" If they did that, I should precious soon begin to think there was something wrong, else they'd 'old their tongues an' leave it to be understood as they was honest. Why, an' it's every bit the same with religion!'

Mr. Boddy listened gravely to this, and had the air of probing the suggested analogy. He had a bad cold, poor old man, and for the moment it made him look as if he indulged too freely in ardent beverages; his nose was red and his eyes were watery.

'How's the little un, my dear?' he asked, as Lydia took a seat by him.

'Oh, she's much better, grandad. Mrs. Grail is so kind to her, you wouldn't believe. She'll be all right again by Monday, I think.'

'Mrs. Grail's kind to her, is she?' remarked Mr. Bower. Why, you're getting great friends with the Grails, Miss Lydia.'

'Yes, we really are.'

'And do you see much of Grail himself?'

'No, not much. We sometimes have tea with them both.'

'Ah, you do? He's a very decent, quiet fellow, is Grail. I dare say he tells you something about Egremont now and then?'

Mr. Bower put the question in a casual way; in truth, it was designed to elicit information which he much desired. He knew that for some time Grail had been on a new footing with the lecturer, that the two often remained together after the class had dispersed; it was a privilege which he regarded disapprovingly, because it lessened his own dignity in the eyes of the other men. He wondered what the subject of these private conversations might be; there had seemed to him something of mystery in Grail's manner when he was plied with a friendly inquiry or two.

'I've heard him speak of the lectures,' said Lydia. 'He says he enjoys them very much.'

'To be sure. Yes, they're very fair lectures, very fair, in their way. I don't know as I've cared quite so much for 'em lately as I did at first. I've felt he was falling off a little. I gave him a hint a few weeks ago; just told him in a quiet way as I thought he was going too far into things that weren't very interesting, but he didn't seem quite to see it. It's always the way with young men of his kind; when you give them a bit of advice, it makes them obstinate. Well, he'll see when he begins again after Christmas. Thomas and Linwood are giving it up, and I shall be rather surprised if Johnson holds out for another course.'

'But I suppose you'll go, Mr. Bower?' said Lydia.

Bower stuck his forefingers into his waistcoat pockets, held his head as one who muses, clicked with his tongue.

'I shall see,' he replied, with a judicial air. 'I don't like to give the young feller up. You see, I may say as it was me put him on the idea. We had a lot of talk about one thing and another one day at the works, and a hint of mine set him off. I should like to make the lectures successful; I believe they're a good thing, if they are properly carried out. I'm a believer in education. It's the educated men as get on in the world. Teach a man to use his brains and he'll soon be worth double wages. But

Egremont must keep up to the mark if he's to have my support. I shall have to have a word or two with him before he begins again. By-the-by, I passed him in Kennington Road just now; I wonder what he's doing about here at this time. Been to the works, perhaps.'

Whilst the portly man thus delivered himself, Lydia let her arm rest on Mr. Boddy's shoulder. It was a caress which he sometimes received from her; he looked round at her affectionately, then continued to pay attention to the weighty words which fell from Mr. Bower. Mrs. Bower, who was loss impressed by her husband's utterances, bent over her sewing. In this way Lydia was able craftily to secure the measurement she needed. And having got this, she was anxious to be back with Thyrza.

'I suppose it's no use waiting for Mary,' she said, rising.

'I don't suppose she'll be back not before nine o'clock,' Mrs. Bower replied. 'Did you want her partic'lar?'

'Oh no, it'll do any time.'

'Whilst I think of it,' said Mrs. Bower, letting her sewing fall upon her lap and settling the upper part of her stout body in an attitude of dignity; 'you and your sister 'll come an' eat your Christmas dinner with us?'

Lydia east down her eyes.

'It's very kind of you, Mrs. Bower, but I'm sure I don't know whether Thyrza 'll be well enough. I must be very careful of her for a time.'

'Well, well, you'll see. It'll only be a quiet little fam'ly dinner this year. You'll know there's places kep' for you.'

Lydia again expressed her thanks, then took leave. As she left the shop, she heard Mr. Bower's voice again raised in impressive oratory.

On entering the house in Walnut Tree Walk, she found Mrs. Grail just descending the stairs. The old lady never spoke above her breath at such casual meetings outside her own door.

'Come in for a minute,' she whispered.

Lydia followed her into the parlour. Gilbert was settled for the evening at the table. A volume lent by Egremont lay before him, and he was making notes from it. At Lydia's entrance he rose and spoke a word, then resumed his reading.

'I've just taken Thyrza a little morsel of jelly I made this afternoon,' Mrs. Grail said, apart to the girl. 'I'm sure she looks better to-night.'

'How good you are, Mrs. Grail! Yes, she does look better, but I couldn't have believed a day or two 'ud have made her so weak. I shan't let her go out before Christmas.'

'No, I don't think you ought, my dear.'

As Mrs. Grail spoke, the knocker of the house-door sounded an unusual summons, a rat-tat, not loud indeed, but distinct from the knocks wont to be heard here.

'Mr. and Mrs. Jarmey are both out,' said Lydia. 'They're gone to the theatre. Perhaps it's for you, Mrs. Grail?'

'No, that's not at all likely.'

'I'll go.'

Lydia opened. A gentleman stood without; he inquired in a pleasant voice if Mr. Grail was at home.

'I think so,' Lydia said. 'Will you please wait a minute?'

She hurried back to the parlour.

'It's a gentleman wants to see Mr. Grail,' she whispered, with the momentary excitement which any little out-of-the-way occurrence produces in those who live a life void of surprises. And she glanced at Gilbert, who had heard what she said. He rose:

'I wonder whether it's Mr. Egremont! Thank you, Miss Trent; I'll go to the door.'

Lydia escaped up the stairs. Gilbert went out into the passage, and his surmise was confirmed. Egremont was there, sheltering himself under an umbrella from rain which was once more beginning to fell.

'Could I have a word with you?' he said, with friendly freedom. 'I should have written, but I had to pass so near—'

'I'm very glad. Will you come in?'

It was the first time that Egremont had been at the house. Gilbert conducted him into the parlour, and took from him his hat and umbrella.

'This is my mother,' he said. 'Mr. Egremont, mother; you'll be glad to see him.'

The old lady regarded Walter with courteous curiosity, and bowed to him. A few friendly words were exchanged, then Egremont said to Grail:

'If you hadn't been in, I should have left a message, asking you to meet me to-morrow afternoon.'

Mrs. Grail was about to leave the room; Egremont begged her to remain.

'It's only a piece of news concerning our library scheme. I think I've found a building that will suit us. Do you know a school in Brook Street, connected with a Wesleyan Chapel somewhere about here?'

Gilbert said that he knew it; his mother also murmured recognition.

'It'll be to let at the end of next quarter: they're building themselves a larger place. I heard about it this afternoon, and as I was told that evening classes are held there, I thought I'd come and have a look at the place to-night. At last it is something like what we want. Could you meet me there, say at three, to-morrow afternoon, so that we could see it together in daylight—if daylight be granted us?'

Grail expressed his readiness.

'You were reading,' Waiter went on, with a glance at the table. 'I mustn't waste your time.'

He rose, but Gilbert said:

'I should be glad if you could stay a few minutes. Perhaps you haven't time?'

'Oh yes. What are you busy with?'

Half an hour's talk followed, of course mainly of books. Egremont looked over the volumes on the shelves; those who love such topics will know how readily gossip spun itself from that centre. He was pleased with Grail's home; it was very much as he had liked to picture it since he had known that Gilbert lived with his mother. Mrs. Grail sat and listened to all that was said, a placid smile on her smooth face. At length Egremont declared that he was consuming his friend's evening.

'Perhaps you'll let me come some other night?' he said, as he took up his hat. 'I know very few people indeed who care to talk of these things in the way I like.'

Gilbert came back from the door with a look of pleasure.

'Now, isn't he a fine fellow, mother? I'm so glad you've seen him.'

'He seems a very pleasant young man indeed,' Mrs. Grail replied. 'He's not quite the picture I'd made of him, but his way of speaking makes you like him from the very first.'

'I never heard him say a word yet that didn't sound genuine,' Gilbert added. 'He speaks what he thinks, and you won't find many men who make you feel that. And he has a mind; I wish you could hear one of his lectures; he speaks in just the same easy running way, and constantly says things one would be glad to remember. They don't understand him, Bower, and Bunce, and the others; they don't *feel* his words as they ought to. I'm afraid he'll only have two or three when he begins again.'

Mrs. Grail turned presently to a different topic.

'Would you believe, Gilbert!' she murmured. 'Those two girls have saved up more than a pound to buy that poor old Mr. Boddy a top-coat for Christmas. When I went up with the jelly, Thyrza had the money out on the table; she told me as a great secret what it was for. Kind-hearted things they are, both of them.'

Gilbert assented silently. His mother seldom elicited a word from him on the subject of the sisters.

On the following afternoon, Gilbert and Egremont met at the appointed place just as three was striking. Already night had begun to close in, a sad wind moaned about the streets, and the cold grey of the sky was patched about with dim shifting black clouds. Egremont was full of cheeriness as he shook hands.

'What a wonderful people we are,' he exclaimed, 'to have developed even so much civilisation in a climate such as this!'

The school building which they were about to inspect stood at the junction of two streets, which consisted chiefly of dwellings. In the nature of things it was ugly. Three steps led up to the narrow entrance, which, as well as the windows on the ground floor, was surrounded with a wholly inappropriate pointed arch. Iron railings ran along the two sides which abutted upon pavements, and by the door was a tall iron support for a lamp; probably it had never been put to its use. There was only one upper storey, and the roof was crowned with a small stack of hideous metal chimneys.

'We must go round to the caretaker's house,' said Egremont, when they had cast their eyes over the face of the edifice.

The way was by a narrow passage between the school itself and the whitewashed side of an adjacent house; this led them into a small paved yard, upon which looked the windows of the caretaker's dwelling, which was the rear portion of the school building. A knock at the door brought a very dirty and very asthmatical old woman, who appeared to resent their visit. When Egremont expressed his desire to go over the school, she muttered querulously what was understood to be an invitation to enter. Followed by Gilbert, Egremont was conducted along a pitch-dark passage.

'Mind the steps!' snarled their guide.

Egremont had already stumbled over an ascent of two when the warning was given, but at the same moment a door was thrown open, giving a view of the main schoolroom.

''Tain't swep' out yet,' remarked the old woman. 'I couldn't tell as nobody was a-comin'. You can complain to them if you like; I'm used to it from all sorts, an' 'taint for much longer, praise goodness! Though there's nothink before me but the parish when the time does come.'

Egremont glanced at the strange creature in surprise, but it seemed better to say nothing. He began to speak of the aspects of the room with his companion.

The place was cheerless beyond description. In a large grate the last embers of a fire were darkening; the air was chill, and, looking up to the ceiling, one saw floating scraps of mist which had somehow come in from the street. The lower half of each window was guarded with lattice-work of thin wire; the windows themselves were grimy, and would have made it dusk within even on a clear day. The whitewash of the ceiling was dark and much cracked. Benches and desks covered half the floor. There were black-boards and other mechanical appliances for teaching, and on the walls hung maps and diagrams.

'The walls seem quite dry,' observed Walter, 'which is a great point.'

They laid their palms against the plaster. The old woman stood with one hand pressed against her bosom, the other behind her back; her head was bent; she seemed to pay no kind of attention to what was said.

'There's room here for some thousands of volumes,' Egremont said, moving to one of the windows. 'It will serve tolerably as a reading-room, too. Nothing like as large as it ought to be, of course, but we must be content to feel our way to better things.'

Gilbert nodded. In spite of his companion's resolute cheerfulness, he felt a distressing dejection creep upon him as he stood in the cold, darkening room. He could not feel the interest and hope which hitherto this project had inspired him with. The figure of the old caretaker impressed him painfully. For any movement she made she might have been asleep; the regular sound of her heavy breathing was quite audible, and vapour rose from her lips upon the air.

'What do you think?' Egremont asked, when Grail remained mute.

'I should think it will do very well. What is there upstairs?'

'Two class-rooms. We should use those for lectures. Let us go up.'

The old woman walked before them to a door opposite that by which they had entered. They found themselves in a small vestibule, out of which, on one hand, a door led into a cloak-room, while on the other ascended a flight of stone stairs. There was nothing noticeable in the rooms above; the windows here were also very dirty, and mist floated below the ceilings.

The caretaker had remained below, contenting herself with indicating the way.

'You seem disappointed,' Walter said. He himself had ceased to talk, he felt cold and uncomfortable.

'No, no, indeed I'm not,' Grail hastened to reply. 'I think it is as good a place as you could have found.'

'We don't see it under very inspiriting conditions. Fire and light and comfortable furniture would make a wonderful difference, even on a day like this.'

Gilbert reproached himself for taking so coldly his friend's generous zeal.

'And books still more,' he replied, 'The room below will be a grand sight with shelves all round the walls.'

'Well, I must make further inquiries, but I think the place will suit us.'

They descended, their footsteps ringing on the stone and echoing up to the roof. The old woman still stood at the foot of the stairs, her head bent, the hand against her side.

'Will you go out here,' she asked, 'or do you want to see anythink else?'

'I should like to see the back part again,' Egremont replied.

She led them across the schoolroom, through the dark passage, and into a small room which had the distant semblance of a parlour. Here she lit a lamp; then, without speaking, guided them over the house, of which she appeared to be the only inhabitant. There were seven rooms; only three of them contained any furniture. Then they all returned to the comfortless parlour.

'Your chest is bad,' Egremont remarked, looking curiously at the woman.

'Yes, I dessay it is,' was the ungracious reply.

'Well, I don't think we need trouble you any more at present, but I shall probably have to come again in a day or two.'

'I dessay you'll find me here.'

'And feeling better, I hope. The weather gives you much trouble, no doubt.'

He held half a crown to her. She regarded it, clasped it in the hand which was against her bosom, and at length dropped a curtsy, though without speaking.

'What a poor crabbed old creature!' Egremont exclaimed, as they walked away. 'I should feel relieved if I knew that she went off at once to the warmth of the public-house opposite.'

'Yes, she hasn't a very cheerful home.'

'Oh, but it can be made a very different house. It has fallen into such neglect. Wait till spring sunshine and the paperhangers invade the place.'

They issued into a main street, and after a little further talk, shook hands and parted.

That night, and through the Sunday that followed, Gilbert continued to suffer even more than his wont from mental dreariness; Mrs. Grail was unable to draw him into conversation.

About four o'clock she said:

'May I ask Lydia and Thyrza to come and have tea with us, Gilbert?'

He looked up absently.

'But they were here last Sunday.'

'Yes, my dear, but I think they like to come, and I'm sure I like to have them.'

'Let us leave it till next Sunday, mother. You don't mind? I feel I must be alone to-night.'

It was a most unusual thing for Gilbert to offer opposition when his mother had expressed a desire for anything. Mrs. Grail at once said:

'I dare say you're right, my dear. Next Sunday 'll be better.'

The next morning he went to his work through a fog so dense that it was with difficulty he followed the familiar way. Lamps were mere lurid blotches in the foul air, perceptible only when close at hand; the footfall of invisible men and women hurrying to factories made a muffled, ghastly sound; harsh bells summoned through the darkness, the voice of pitiless taskmasters to whom all was indifferent save the hour of toil. Gilbert was racked with headache. Bodily suffering made him as void of intellectual desire as the meanest labourer then going forth to earn bread; he longed for nothing more than to lie down and lose consciousness of the burden of life.

Then came Christmas Eve. The weather had changed; to-night there was frost in the air, and the light of stars made a shimmer upon the black vault. Gilbert always gave this season to companionship with his mother. About seven o'clock they were talking quietly together of memories light and grave, of Gilbert's boyhood, of his sister who was dead, of his father who was dead. Then came a pause, whilst both were silently busy with the irrecoverable past.

Mrs. Grail broke the silence to say:

'You're a lonely man, Gilbert.'

'Why no, not lonely, mother. I might be, but for you.'

'Yes, you're lonely, my dear. It's poor company that I can give you. I should like to see you with a happier look on your face before I die.'

Gilbert had no reply ready.

'You think too poorly of yourself,' his mother resumed, 'and you always have done. But there's people have a better judgment of you. Haven't you thought that somebody looks always very pleased when you read or talk, and sits very quiet when you've nothing to say, and always says good-night to you so prettily?'

'Mother, mother, don't speak like that! I've thought nothing of the kind. Put that out of your head; never speak of it again.'

His voice was not untender, but very grave. The lines of his face hardened. Mrs. Grail glanced at him timidly, and became mute.

A loud double knock told that the postman had delivered a letter at the house. Whilst the two still sat in silence Mrs. Jarmey tapped at their door and said:

'A letter for you, Mr. Grail.'

'From Mr. Egremont,' said Gilbert, as he resumed his seat and opened the envelope. 'More about the library I expect.'

He read to himself.

> 'My dear Grail,—I have decided to take the school building on a lease of seven years, after again carefully examining it and finding it still to my mind. It will be free at the end of March. By that time I hope to have sketched out something of a rudimentary catalogue, and before summer the library should be open.
>
> 'I asked you to come and look over this place with me because I had a project in my mind with reference to the library which concerns yourself. I lay it before you in a letter, that you may think it over quietly and reply at your leisure. I wish to offer you the position of librarian: I am sure I could not find anyone better suited for the post, and certainly there is no man whom I should like so well to see occupying it. I propose that the salary be a hundred pounds a year, with free tenancy of the dwelling-house at present so dolorously occupied—I am sure it can be made a comfortable abode—and of course, gas and fuel. I should make arrangements for the necessary cleaning, &c., with some person of the neighbourhood; your own duties would be solely those of librarian and reading-room superintendent.
>
> 'The library should be open, I think, from ten to ten, for I want to lose no possibility of usefulness. If one loafer be tempted to come in and read, the day's object is gained. These hours are, of course, too long for you alone; I would provide

you with an assistant, so that you could assure for yourself, let us say, four hours free out of the twelve. But details would be easily arranged between us. By-the-by, Sunday must *not* be a day of closing; to make it so would be to deprive ourselves of the greatest opportunity. Your freedom for one entire day in the week should be guaranteed.

'I offer this because I should like to have you working with me, and because I believe that such work would be more to your taste than that in which you are now occupied. It would, moreover, leave you a good deal of time for study; we are not likely to be overwhelmed with readers and borrowers during the daytime. But you will consider the proposal precisely as you would do if it came from a stranger, and will accept or reject it as you see fit.

'I leave town to-day for about a week. Will you write to me at the end of that time?—Always yours, my dear Grail,
'WALTER EGREMONT.'

Mrs. Grail showed no curiosity about the letter; the subject of the interrupted conversation held her musing. When Gilbert had folded the sheets, and, in the manner of one who receives few letters, returned it to its envelope, he said:

'Yes, it's about the library. He's taken the house for seven years.'

His mother murmured an expression of interest. For another minute the clock on the mantel-piece ticked loud; then Gilbert rose, and without saying anything, went out.

He entered his bedroom. The darkness was complete, but he moved with the certainty of habit to a chair by the head of the bed, and there seated himself. Presently he felt a painful surging in his throat, then a gush of warm tears forced its way to his eyes. It cost him a great effort to resist the tendency to sob aloud. He was hot and cold alternately, and trembled as though a fever were coming upon him.

In a quarter of an hour he lit the candle, and, after a glance at himself in the glass, bathed his face. Then he took down his overcoat from the door, and put it on. His hat, too, he took, and went to the parlour.

'I have to go out, mother,' he said, standing at the door. 'I'll be back by supper-time.'

'Very well, my dear,' was the quiet reply.

He walked out to the edge of the pavement, and stood a moment, as if in doubt as to his direction. Then he looked at the upper windows of the house, as we saw him do one night half a year ago. There was a light this time in the sisters' room.

He turned towards Lambeth Walk. The market of Christmas Eve was flaring and clamorous; the odours of burning naphtha and fried fish were pungent on the wind. He walked a short distance among the crowd, then found the noise oppressive and turned into a by-way. As he did so, a street organ began to play in front of a public-house close by. Grail drew near; there were children forming a dance, and he stood to watch them.

Do you know that music of the obscure ways, to which children dance? Not if you have only heard it ground to your ears' affliction beneath your windows in the square. To hear it aright you must stand in the darkness of such a by-street as this, and for the moment be at one with those who dwell around, in the blear-eyed houses, in the dim burrows of poverty, in the unmapped haunts of the semi-human. Then you will know the significance of that vulgar clanging of melody; a pathos of which you did not dream will touch you, and therein the secret of hidden London will be half revealed. The life of men who toil without hope, yet with the hunger of an unshaped desire; of women in whom the sweetness of their sex is perishing under labour and misery; the laugh, the song of the girl who strives to enjoy her year or two of youthful vigour, knowing the darkness of the years to come; the careless defiance of the youth who feels his blood and revolts against the lot which would tame it; all that is purely human in these darkened multitudes speaks to you as you listen. It is the half-conscious

striving of a nature which knows not what it would attain, which deforms a true thought by gross expression, which clutches at the beautiful and soils it with foul hands.

The children were dirty and ragged, several of them barefooted, nearly all bare-headed, but they danced with noisy merriment. One there was, a little girl, on crutches; incapable of taking a partner, she stumped round and round, circling upon the pavement, till giddiness came upon her and she had to fall back and lean against the wall, laughing aloud at her weakness. Gilbert stepped up to her, and put a penny into her hand; then, before she had recovered from her surprise, passed onwards.

He came out at length by Lambeth parish church, which looks upon the river; the bells were ringing a harsh peal of four notes, unchangingly repeated. Thence he went forward on to Lambeth Bridge.

Unsightliest of all bridges crossing Thames, the red hue of its iron superstructure, which in daylight only enhances the meanness of its appearance, at night invests it with a certain grim severity; the archway, with its bolted metal plates, its wire-woven cables, over-glimmered with the yellowness of the gas-lamps which it supports, might be the entrance to some fastness of ignoble misery. The road is narrow, and after nightfall has but little traffic.

Gilbert walked as far as the middle of the bridge, then leaned upon the parapet and looked northwards. The tide was running out; it swept darkly onwards to the span of Westminster Bridge, whose crescent of lights it repeated in long unsteady rays. Along the base of the Houses of Parliament the few sparse lamps contrasted with the line of brightness on the Embankment opposite. The Houses themselves rose grandly in obscure magnitude; the clock-tower beaconed with two red circles against the black sky, the greater tower stood night-clad, and between them were the dim pinnacles, multiplied in shadowy grace. Farther away Gilbert could just discern a low, grey shape, that resting-place of poets and of kings which to look upon filled his heart with worship.

In front of the Embankment, a few yards out into the stream, was moored a string of barges; between them and the shore the reflected lamp-light made one unbroken breadth of radiance, blackening the mid-current. From that the eye rose to St. Thomas's Hospital, spreading block after block, its windows telling of the manifold woe within. Nearer was the Archbishop's Palace, dark, lifeless; the roofs were defined against a sky made lurid by the streets of Lambeth. On the pier below signalled two crimson lights.

The church bells kept up their clangorous discord, softened at times by the wind. A steamboat came fretting up the stream; when it had passed under the bridge, its spreading track caught the reflected gleams and flung them away to die on unsearchable depths. Then issued from beneath a barge with set sail, making way with wind and tide; in silence it moved onwards, its sail dark and ghastly, till the further bridge swallowed it.

The bells ceased. Gilbert bent his head and listened to the rush of the water, voiceful, mysterious. Sometimes he had stood there and wished that the dread tide could whelm him. His mood was far other now; some power he did not understand had brought him here as to the place where he could best realise this great joy that had befallen him.

But the wind blew piercingly, and when at length he moved from the parapet, he found that his arms were quite numb; doubtless he had stood longer than he thought. Instead of returning by the direct way, he walked along the Embankment It was all but deserted; the tread of a policeman echoed from the distance. But in spite of the bitter sky, two people were sitting together on one of the benches—a young man and a work-girl; they were speaking scarcely above a whisper. Gilbert averted his face as he passed them, and for the moment his eyes had their pain-stricken look.

Issuing into Westminster Bridge Road, he found himself once more amid a throng. And before he had gone far he recognised a figure that walked just ahead of him. It was Ackroyd; he was accompanied by a girl of whom Gilbert had no knowledge—Miss Totty Nancarrow. They were talking in a merry, careless way: Ackroyd smoked a cigar, and Totty walked with her usual independence, with that swaying of the haunches and swing of the hands with palm turned outwards

which is characteristic of the London work-girl. Her laugh now and then rose to a high note; her companion threw back his head and joined in the mirth. Clearly Ackroyd was in a way to recover his spirits.

At the junction of two ways they stopped. Gilbert stopped too, for he did not care to pass them and be recognised. He crossed the road, and from the other side watched them as they stood talking. Now they were taking leave of each other. Ackroyd appeared to hold the girl's hand longer than she liked; when she struggled to get away, he suddenly bent forward and snatched a kiss. With a gesture of indignation she escaped from him.

Gilbert had a desire to join Ackroyd, now that the latter was alone. But as he began to recross the street, the young man moved on and turned into a public-house. Gilbert again stopped, and, disregarding the crowds about him, lost himself in thought. He determined at length to go his way.

Mrs. Grail had supper ready, with some mince pies of her own making.

'Each lot I make,' she said, as they sat down, 'I say to myself they'll be the last.'

'No, no, mother; we shall eat a good many together yet,' Gilbert replied, cheerily. The wind had brought a touch of colour to his cheeks and made his eyes glisten.

'Have you taken any upstairs?' he asked presently.

'No, my dear. Do you think I may?'

'Oh, I should think so.'

The old lady looked at him and grew thoughtful.

There was no work to rise to on the morrow. With a clear conscience Gilbert could sit on into the still hours which were so precious to him. And again, before going to rest, he stepped quietly from the house to look at the upper windows.

CHAPTER X
TEMPTING FORTUNE

Thyrza continued to be far from well. The day-long darkness encouraged her natural tendency to sad dreaming. When alone, in Lydia's absence at the work-room, she sometimes had fits of weeping; it was a relief to shed tears. She could have given no explanation of the sufferings which found this outlet; her heart lay under a cold weight, that was all she knew.

Lydia pursued her course with the usual method and contentment, yet, in these days just before Christmas, with a perceptible falling off in the animation which was the note of her character. Perhaps she too was affected by the weather; perhaps she was anxious about Thyrza; one would have said, however, that she had some trouble distinct from these.

On Christmas Eve she ran round to Paradise Street, to make arrangements for the next day. Evidently it would not be wise for Thyrza to leave home; that being the ease, it was decided that Mr. Boddy should come and have tea with the girls in their own room. Lydia talked over these things with Mary in the kitchen below the shop, where odours of Christmas fare were already rife. The parlour was full of noisy people, amid whom Mr. Bower was holding weighty discourse; the friends had gone below for privacy.

'So I shall keep the coat till he comes, Lydia said. 'I know Thyrza would like to see his poor old face when he puts it on. And you might come round yourself, Mary, just for an hour.'

'I'll see if I can.'

'I suppose you'll have people at night?'

'I don't know, I'm sure. I'd much rather come and sit with you, but mother may want me.'

Lydia asked:

'Has Mr. Ackroyd been here lately?'

'I haven't seen him. I hope not.'

'Why do you say that, Mary?' asked Lydia impatiently.

'I only say what I think, dear.'

Lydia for once succeeded in choosing wiser silence. But that look which had no place upon her fair, open countenance came for a moment, a passing darkness which might be forecast of unhappy things.

At four o'clock on the following afternoon—this Christmas fell on a Friday—everything was ready in Walnut Tree Walk for Mr. Boddy's arrival. The overcoat, purchased by Lydia after a vast amount of comparing and selecting, of deciding and rejecting and redeciding, was carefully hidden, to be produced at a suitable moment. The bitter coldness of the day gladdened the girls now that they knew the old man would go away well wrapped up. This coat had furnished a subject for many an hour of talk between them, and now as they waited they amused themselves with anticipation of what Mr. Boddy would say, what he would think, how joyfully he would throw aside that one overcoat he did possess—a garment really too far gone, and with no pretence of warmth in it. Thyrza introduced a note of sadness by asking:

'What 'll happen, Lyddy, if he gets that he can't earn any thing?'

'I sometimes think of that,' Lydia replied gravely. 'We couldn't expect the Bowers to keep him there if he couldn't pay his rent. But I always hope that we shall be able to find what he needs. It isn't much, poor grandad! And you see we can always manage to save something, Thyrza.'

'But it wouldn't be enough—nothing like enough for a room and meals, Lyddy.'

'Oh, we shall find a way Perhaps'—she laughed—'we shall have more money some day.'

Two rings at the bell on the lower landing announced their visitor's arrival. Lydia ran downstairs and returned with the old man, whose face was very red from the raw air. He had a muffler wrapped

about his neck, but the veteran overcoat was left behind, for the simple reason that Mr. Boddy felt he looked more respectable without it. His threadbare black suit had been subjected to vigorous brushing, with a little exercise of the needle here and there. A pair of woollen gloves, long kept for occasions of ceremony, were the most substantial article of clothing that he wore. A baize bag, of which Lydia had relieved him, contained his violin.

'I thought you'd maybe like a little music, my dear,' he said as he kissed Thyrza. 'It's cheerin' when you don't feel quite the thing. I doubt you can't sing though.'

'Oh, the cold's all gone,' replied Thyrza. 'We'll see, after tea.'

They made much of him, and it must have been very sweet to the poor old fellow to be so affectionately tended by these whom he loved as his own children.

Mary Bower came not long after tea, then Mr. Boddy took out his violin from the bag and played all the favourite old tunes, those which brought back their childhood to the two girls. To please Mary, Lydia asked for a hymn-tune, one she had grown fond of in chapel. Mary began to sing it, so Lydia got her hymn-book and asked Thyrza to sing with them. The air was a sweet one, and Thyrza's voice gave it touching beauty as she sang soft and low. Other hymns followed; Mary Bower fell into her gentler mood and showed how pleasant she could be when nothing irritated her susceptibilities. The hours passed quickly to nine o'clock, then Mary said it was time for her to go.

'Do you want to stay a little longer, Mr. Boddy,' she said, 'or will you go home with me?'

'I'd rather walk home in good company than alone, Miss Mary,' he replied. 'I call it walking, but it's only a stump-stump.'

'But it would be worse if you couldn't walk at all,' Mary said.

'Right, my dear, as you always are. I've no call to grumble. It's a bad habit as grows on me, I fear. If Lyddy 'ad only tell me of it, both together you might do me good. But Lyddy treats me like a spoilt child. It's her old way.'

'Mary shall take us both in hand,' said Lydia. 'She shall cure me of my sharp temper and you of grumbling, grandad; and I know which 'll be the hardest job!'

Laughing with kindly mirth, the old man drew on his woollen gloves and took up his hat and the violin-bag. Then he offered to say good-bye.

'But you're forgetting your top-coat, grandad,' said Lydia.

'I didn't come in it, my dear.'

'What's that, then? I'm sure *we* don't wear such things.'

She pointed to a chair, on which Thyrza had just artfully spread the gift. Mr. Boddy looked in a puzzled way; had he really come in his coat and forgotten it? He drew nearer.

'That's no coat o' mine, Lyddy,' he said.

Thyrza broke into a laugh.

'Why, whose is it, then?' she exclaimed. 'Don't play tricks, grandad; put it on at once!'

'Now come, come; you're keeping Mary waiting,' said Lydia, catching up the coat and holding it ready.

Then Mr. Boddy understood. He looked from Lydia to Thyrza with dimmed eyes.

'I've a good mind never to speak to either of you again,' he said in a tremulous voice. 'As if you hadn't need enough of your money! Lyddy, Lyddy! And you're as bad, Thyrza; a grown-up woman like you, you ought to teach your sister better. Why there; it's no good; I don't know what to say to you. Now what do you think of this, Mary?'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.